

# [***Democrats lean into border security as it shapes contest for control of Congress***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BR8-CG71-DYMD-64S9-00000-00&context=1516831)

The Associated Press

April 6, 2024 Saturday 4:02 AM GMT

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**Section:** WASHINGTON DATELINE; STATE AND REGIONAL

**Length:** 1356 words

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**Dateline:** WASHINGTON

**Body**

WASHINGTON — With immigration shaping the elections that will decide control of Congress, Democrats are trying to outflank Republicans and convince voters they can address problems at the U.S. border with Mexico, embracing an issue that has traditionally been used against them.

The shift in strategy, especially from Democrats running in battleground states, comes as the Biden administration has struggled to manage an [*unprecedented influx of migrants*](https://apnews.com/article/immigration-election-border-biden-mexico-mayorkas-a99784468b62ff211e5f1ed06a01ed40) at the Southwest border. Donald Trump, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, has led his party in vilifying immigrants as “ [*poisoning the blood*](https://apnews.com/article/trump-hitler-poison-blood-history-f8c3ff512edd120252596a4743324352) ” of the country and called for mass deportations of migrants. And as the GOP looks to flip control of the Senate, they are tying Democrats to President Joe Biden's handling of immigration.

The tactic has already figured large in elections like Arizona's Senate race, a seat Democrats almost certainly need to win to save their majority. Republican Kari Lake has repeatedly linked Rep. Ruben Gallego, the likely Democratic nominee, to Biden, telling the crowd at a March event that “there's really not a difference between the two."

Democrats are no longer shrugging off such attacks: They believe they can tout their own proposals for fixing the border, especially after Trump and Republican lawmakers [*rejected a bipartisan proposal on border security*](https://apnews.com/article/congress-ukraine-aid-border-security-386dcc54b29a5491f8bd87b727a284f8) earlier this year.

“It gives some Democrats an opportunity to say, ‘Look, I’m here for solutions,'" Gallego said. "Clearly, the Republicans are here to play games. And so whether it’s Kari Lake or Donald Trump, they’re not interested in border security. They’re interested in the ***politics*** of border security. And, we’re here to actually do something about it.”

During most of his five House terms, Gallego had been a member of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, but as he prepared for a Senate run, he quietly left the group. Now he's emphasizing his work on bolstering the ranks of U.S. Customs and Border Protection and securing funding for communities impacted by recent spikes in immigration, which he calls a “crisis.”

Standing in front of the Santa Cruz County Sheriff’s Office in Arizona last month, Gallego slammed the GOP for blocking the bipartisan border bill.

“Every minute we wait means more fentanyl deaths, more strain on our first responders, and the looming possibility of street releases — something that no small community wants,” he said.

Just two states over, Democrats are hoping to bolster their chances of holding the Senate by pulling off a difficult feat — turning Texas blue, at least in one race. Some see a chance to flip a long-held GOP seat [*by fielding Rep. Colin Allred*](https://apnews.com/article/texas-senate-race-2024-allred-cruz-a0a1b4a21feb99593d72cf4a2cf7f7aa), D-Texas, against Sen. Ted Cruz.

Allred has emphasized his connection to border communities on the campaign trail and recounted how he had made childhood visits to Brownsville, Texas, where his grandfather worked as a customs officer.

“Our border communities are not just political backdrops, not just places you go to point out problems,” he said at a news conference last month. “They’re places where real people live, where they’re trying to raise their families.”

Both Allred and Gallego have joined a House task force focused on border security. Some Senate Democrats have also recently leaned into legislation focused on immigration enforcement. The Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee has launched ads criticizing GOP senators for opposing the bipartisan Senate deal.

It is all a part of a strategy to neutralize the GOP's advantage on the issue by convincing swing voters that Democrats are serious about border policy.

“Democrats aren’t going to win on immigration this year, but they have to get closer to a draw on the issue to get to a place where people take them seriously,” said Lanae Erickson, a senior vice president at Third Way, a centrist Democrat think tank. “Be palatable enough on that issue that people are then willing to consider other priorities.”

Still, Democrats face a difficult task when it comes to the ***politics*** of border security. A new poll from [*The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research*](https://apnorc.org/) has found that almost half of adults blame Biden and congressional Democrats for the current situation at the U.S.-Mexico border, while 41% blame Republicans in Congress.

Republicans are also using practically every tool in Congress to denounce Biden's handling of the southern border. They are forcing Democrats to take tough votes on border security measures and demanding policy changes in return for aiding Ukraine. And the House in February [*impeached*](https://apnews.com/article/mayorkas-impeachment-congress-southern-border-migrants-7234ad98aa425295e475fc6ff566813a) Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas for his handling of the southern border.

“The reason you’re seeing the Democrats talk about the border is because they have a political crisis, not because they’re trying to solve the border crisis,” said Sen. Steve Daines, the chair of the National Republican Senatorial Committee. “If they truly want to solve the border crisis, President Biden can go back to the Oval Office with a stroke of a pen and can make significant inroads in solving this problem. But he chooses not to.”

Daines visited Arizona this week as part of an effort to boost Lake, a fervent Trump supporter who has insisted that she lost a 2022 race for governor [*because of fraud*](https://apnews.com/article/kari-lake-stephen-richer-defamation-lawsuit-1feafd7656310f0dc1f8d91e7e376d00). Republicans lost several Senate elections in 2022, including in Arizona, Pennsylvania and Nevada, after Trump-backed candidates struggled to raise money and connect with a broader, more moderate range of voters during the general election.

This year, as Republicans look to win Senate seats in West Virginia, Montana, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Maryland, they are uniting around border policy changes. They are also bringing up past comments and votes from Gallego and Allred as well as vulnerable senators.

In Texas, one political action committee aligned with Cruz has launched an ad attacking Allred for calling the border wall “racist” in 2018. And according to an analysis by media tracking firm AdImpact, over $26 million was spent in February on TV ads about the border and immigration in federal and down-ballot races in Texas, Arizona, Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, Wisconsin and Ohio by candidates, political groups and other groups.

Still, Democrats on Capitol Hill [*have all opposed*](https://apnews.com/article/immigration-biden-trump-election-3e27793981ecda46d1b87d996f04dce0) Republican legislation that would bring back many of the Trump administration’s border policies, including restarting construction of border walls.

“You’re going to be painted as an open border Democrat no matter what, so talk about solutions,” said Maria Cardona, a Democratic strategist.

She is urging candidates to lean into the immigration debate by discussing plans for border security and policies to help immigrants who have set up lives in the country. It's an approach that worked under former Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, she said.

Still, the shift in the way Democrats talk about the border could shape the future of immigration policy. The hardline immigration measures pursued by the Trump administration spurred a reaction by Democrats to oppose tough immigration enforcement measures. Now, some Democrats argue that the party should move away from a stance that border security and reforms for legal immigration should not be inextricably tied together. But that approach could also disenchant progressive and Latino voters.

“As we look towards the future, I would hope that Democrats see that despite all the noise we see about the border, people also really care about pathways to citizenship for immigrants who have been here for many years,” said Beatriz Lopez, the deputy director of The Immigration Hub.

Most Democrats, including Gallego and Allred, still express support for that kind of immigration reform. But what’s different is that Democrats also see the necessity of talking about their border policy proposals, said Rep. Henry Cuellar, a Texas Democrat.

“For so long, the Republicans have had a narrative about the border being a dangerous place and out of control," said Cuellar, who is leading the House Democrats for Border Security group. “I think it’s important that Democrats also have a narrative about border security. We care about border security.”

**Load-Date:** April 6, 2024

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