

# [***Gov. Greg Abbott's border tactics force Democrats to confront migrant crisis in their own backyards***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BCX-T741-JBSS-S377-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Texas Gov. [*Greg Abbott*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/16/us/texas-greg-abbott-eagle-pass-base/index.html)'s escalating border tactics have brought the migrant crisis to the doorsteps of Democratic-led cities and states, placing the issue at the forefront in a heated election cycle and forcing Democrats to answer to it.

[*President Joe Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) and Abbott have sparred over the handling of the US-Mexico border for years as the Republican governor has taken more aggressive actions to try to stem the flow of migration.

But his bussing of migrants to deep-blue cities - with a total of more than 100,000 sent to Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, New York City, Philadelphia and Washington, DC - [*elevated the issue*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/14/politics/immigration-democrats-republicans-what-matters/index.html) in the minds of voters thousands of miles away from the US-Mexico border.

"What Abbott was and is doing - as shameful as it is to human beings as political pawns - it was effective in drawing the attention of people in communities far away from the border to the challenge we've been facing on the border for years," Texas Rep. Veronica Escobar, a Democrat who serves as co-chair of Biden's reelection campaign, told CNN.

"While he has been unsuccessful in terms of the policy, he has been successful in terms of the ***politics***," Escobar, who represents a district along the US-Mexico border, said of Abbott.

The White House has recently taken a tougher approach to the southern border, embracing potential measures [*such as shutting it down*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/29/politics/border-shutdown-biden-what-matters/index.html). Sources told CNN the Biden administration is now [*considering executive action*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/21/politics/biden-considering-executive-action-to-close-southern-border-sources-say/index.html) to restrict migrants' ability to seek asylum at the US-Mexico border if they crossed illegally - a maneuver reminiscent of controversial action from the [*Donald Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/president-donald-trump-45) era.

But the Texas governor's handling of the border has placed him front and center on an issue that Republicans are seeking to make a dominant theme of the 2024 election.

Republican governors - eager to play their own roles in what the party sees as a political winner - have rushed to back Abbott, including sending National Guard troops to aid his efforts.

Earlier this month, more than a dozen governors traveled to the border city of Eagle Pass, where Texas has sought to limit US Border Patrol's access in a challenge to the administration's border policies.

"We've seen the catastrophic consequences of Joe Biden's open border policy," Abbott said then.

Abbott's [*migrant busing program*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/30/politics/texas-migrant-busing-cost-abbott-washington-dc-new-york/index.html), which he launched in 2022 to fierce criticism from Democrats, has pressured blue states to contend with an issue that had previously unfolded hundreds of miles away.

In January, Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker took out a full-page ad in the Austin American-Statesman newspaper urging Abbott to stop sending buses of migrants to Chicago amid below-zero temperatures.

"Your callousness, sending buses and planes full of migrants in this weather, is now life-threatening to every one of the arrivals. Hundreds of children's and families' health and survival are at risk due to your actions," Pritzker wrote.

In Colorado, Denver Mayor Mike Johnston warned that the city was at a breaking point. And in New York City, Mayor Eric Adams filed a lawsuit seeking $700 million from 17 charter bus companies that Abbott has used to bus migrants to the city.

Democratic strategists have acknowledged the political effect of Abbott's moves.

"The fear of Abbott's stunts working to scare people was there from the beginning, and there's a lot of people running around right now scared that it's working," one Democratic strategist told CNN.

"He played into the idea of pitting immigrants against the American people in general and against immigrants who have been here for years," the strategist added.

Migrants often move to cities within the United States if they're eligible to be released from government custody and as they go through their immigration proceedings. But Abbott sent thousands of migrants to select cities with no heads-up, catching officials by surprise and leaving them scrambling to respond.

White House officials have slammed the Texas governor for using migrants as "political pawns" and laid blame on Republicans for not moving forward legislation in Congress that would overhaul the immigration system.

Behind the scenes, administration officials have [*worked with city and state officials*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/05/politics/white-house-federal-spaces-house-migrants/index.html) to address issues, such as finding enough shelter space for migrants and providing additional federal funds.

Some of those efforts, spurred in part by the outcry stemming from Abbott's busing program, led to nearly [*half a million Venezuelan migrants in the US*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/20/politics/venzuelans-humanitarian-relief-biden-administration/index.html) being eligible for a form of humanitarian protection and an accompanying work permit, and resulted in more resources for cities and states receiving migrants.

While Abbott has played an outsize role in driving the border security debate well beyond Texas lines, Democrats are seizing on congressional Republicans [*blocking a tough border security measure*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/07/politics/senate-border-ukraine-israel-aid-vote/index.html) to argue that the GOP isn't serious on the issue.

On Capitol Hill, a bipartisan group of senators negotiated a border compromise. But Republican lawmakers quickly turned on the measure following opposition from Trump, the GOP presidential front-runner.

Democrats ran on the GOP's opposition to that border security proposal in last week's special election for a vacant House seat in New York.

Tom Suozzi, the [*Democratic winner of that race*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/13/politics/santos-seat-tom-suozzi-mazi-pilip/index.html), beat back Republican efforts to blame New York City's migrant crisis on Democrats. He criticized Biden at times for his handling of the border and called for its temporary closure. But Suozzi also lambasted Trump and congressional Republicans for the collapse of the bipartisan deal.

Republicans on Capitol Hill argued that Suozzi's approach won't translate across the political map this fall.

"Their candidate ran like a Republican. He sounded like a Republican talking about border and immigration because that's the top issue on the hearts and minds of everybody," House Speaker Mike Johnson told reporters after the special election.

But Escobar argued that the GOP's seriousness on the issue was called into question following the blocking of the Senate border bill, which included tough enforcement measures such as providing extraordinary powers to the Homeland Security secretary to shut down the border. The Texas congresswoman welcomed her party leaning in on immigration.

Democratic strategist Maria Cardona said the party would have had to grapple with immigration this year regardless of Abbott's actions, but his efforts forced the issue in a new way.

"We always knew immigration was going to be front and center, given Trump was going to be the nominee," she said. "This just made them do it quicker than they probably thought they had to for the election."

Abbott has credited his border operation, known as Operation Lone Star, with driving down border crossings. But the Texas-Mexico portion of the border has continued to see migrant surges despite the operation.

More recently, US Homeland Security officials have attributed the decline in overall border crossings to ongoing high-level talks between the US and Mexico, which has doubled down on enforcement, but they caution that encounters historically drop in January before ticking up again.

Border arrests dropped by 50% in January, compared with December, according to newly released federal data.

Acting US Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Troy Miller conceded that authorities still face hurdles on the border, saying in a statement this month: "We continue to experience serious challenges along our border which surpass the capacity of the immigration system."

In January, US Border Patrol reported 124,220 encounters along the US-Mexico frontier. Notably, there was a significant drop in Venezuelans - nearly 11,600 compared with nearly 58,000 in December. Both the US and Mexico have restarted deportation flights to Venezuela.

Immigrant advocates are pushing for Democrats to seize on immigration this election cycle and balance promoting border security with lawful pathways to migrate to the United States.

"Our frustration has been that Democrats haven't leaned in on the issues. [Abbott has] forced them to not ignore it," said Vanessa Cardenas, executive director of America's Voice. "The answer is not to run away from the problem."

By Priscilla Alvarez and Eric Bradner, CNN

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