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A Guide for Advocates

How To Talk About Trump's Border Wall

Welcome to NAVIGATOR – a project designed to better understand the American public's views on issues of the day and help advocates, elected officials, and other interested parties understand the language, imagery and messaging needed to make and win key policy arguments. This edition features findings from a national online survey of 1,500 registered voters conducted September 11-16, 2019.

Every month, we pick a few topics for exploration. The topics we select aren't meant to cover every issue area facing the progressive community, but rather to give actionable advice on how to talk about key issue areas. We'll be sharing our findings throughout the month, and in this volume we focus on the border wall.

Of course, immigration is an incredibly complex topic and the implications for advocates and other progressive communicators are vast. In this memo we aim to address just one part of the conversation – Trump's border wall – and hope to provide useful insight and guidance.

President Trump has proposed building a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border. How can progressives make the most persuasive case against it?
Progressives should argue the president's 20 billion-dollar border wall is a poor use of taxpayer money and not the best way to keep Americans safe.

Argue a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border would be ineffective, expensive, and wasteful.

Americans oppose building a wall along the U.S. border with Mexico by a narrow 4-point margin (46% support, 50% oppose). In the same survey, approval of Trump is just 41%, meaning the wall could provide the president a tool to win over skeptics if progressives don't make their case. However, there is a strong case to be made against the border wall:

→ The wall is <u>ineffective</u> and fails to address the major safety threats Americans face.

→ The wall is <u>expensive</u> and would cost taxpayers over 20 billion dollars – a waste of limited resources.

→ There are <u>better approaches</u> to securing our ports of entry and the border.

There are two additional arguments that are well-received by progressive audiences, but less effective at winning with the majority of Americans on the specific topic of the wall: the wall is racist, or that it goes against American values. However, it is worth noting for progressives who want to focus on Trump's poor record on race relations, there are other examples besides the wall that the public finds more troubling (a topic that we will explore in depth in our next release on Navigator).

Ineffective: The wall would fail to address the major safety threats we face.
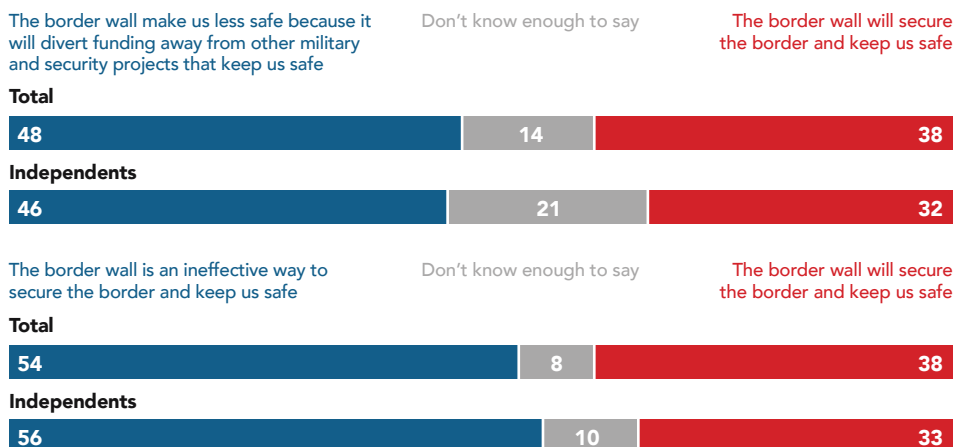
Public safety is often at the center of President Trump's defense of the border wall, but it can also be at the center of the argument against it. Many progressives have argued a wall along the southern border does nothing to address important security concerns at ports of entry like seaports and airports, and Americans generally agree. Americans are also, by a clear margin, likely to see other public safety threats – like gun violence – as bigger safety threats.

Regardless of whether you support or oppose the wall in general, which of the following do you agree with more?

The wall fails to address our biggest safety threats, which include gun violence and homegrown terrorism	Don't know enough to say	The border wall solves the biggest safety threat facing America
61	11	28

The wall fails to address our biggest safety threats, as most drugs and potential terrorists go through airports and seaports and not the border	Don't know enough to say	The border wall solves the biggest safety threat facing America
58	14	28

Americans, including those who don't identify with either political party, find it credible that the wall is not the best way to keep Americans safe. In fact, a plurality side with the argument that the wall will make the country <u>less</u> safe rather than more safe (48% to 38%) because it diverts funding from other important security priorities. However, it's even more persuasive (54% to 38%, in a split sample experiment) to simply argue the wall is "an ineffective way to secure the border and keep us safe."

Regardless of whether you support or oppose the wall in general, which of the following do you agree with more?

The border wall make us less safe because it will divert funding away from other military and security projects that keep us safe	Don't know enough to say	The border wall will secure the border and keep us safe
Total		
48	14	38
Independents		
46	21	32

The border wall is an ineffective way to secure the border and keep us safe	Don't know enough to say	The border wall will secure the border and keep us safe
Total		
54	8	38
Independents		
56	10	33

Expensive: The wall will cost 20 billion dollars – and because it's ineffective, it wastes taxpayer money.

The ineffectiveness of the wall is just one part of the equation: progressives should also make clear that the wall is expensive, meaning the focus on building a physical wall along the entire border has consequences. The argument that there are "better ways to spend taxpayer money" is highly credible (64% say this is probably or definitely true) as is the claim that the wall is simply "a waste of money" (54%).

Respondents who were not strongly supportive of the wall to begin with (68% of the public overall) actually selected the wall's price tag and wastefulness as the strongest single argument against the wall. Together, both of these arguments ranked higher than arguments more focused on racism or American values – and this was true across the political spectrum, with "20 billion dollars" rising to the top among Democrats, independents, and Republicans alike.

One thing progressive talkers can start doing right now is referring to the border wall as the "20 billion-dollar wall" as often as possible. While this memo shows there is more nuance to the debate than that, attaching the price tag is an easy and memorable way to drive public opposition to Trump's wall.

A 20 billion-dollar waste.

Regardless of how you feel about the border wall in general, which of the following do you think is the strongest argument for opposing the border wall?
(Asked among 68% of respondents not strongly supportive of the wall)

■ **Total**   ■ **Independents**

The border wall will cost over 20 billion dollars and is a waste of taxpayer money
- Total: 40
- Independents: 35

A physical border wall is an ineffective way to secure the border compared to better border security solutions that rely on technology instead
- Total: 33
- Independents: 34

Money for the border wall is coming from disaster and hurricane relief and construction for the U.S. military
- Total: 23
- Independents: 19

The wall will leave a permanent, negative symbol on our border that goes against our values as a nation of immigrants
- Total: 21
- Independents: 14

The border wall is fundamentally motivated by racism towards Latino immigrants
- Total: 18
- Independents: 15

The two political parties clearly cannot agree on the border wall and should move on to passing immigration solutions that can be agreed upon
- Total: 17
- Independents: 17

Expensive and ineffective.

A focus on the wall's inability to achieve its purported objective at a reasonable cost resonates across many demographic groups. The charge of racism has salience among certain groups with progressive tendencies – particularly Hispanics – so that message may be resonant for targeted audiences. But even among the progressive base, the most broadly applicable description of the wall is that it is ineffective and expensive.

Do any of the following describe your concerns about the wall?
(Asked among 68% of respondents not strongly supportive of the wall)

	Total	Dem	Ind	Rep	WC*	WNC**	Black	Hisp
The expensive border wall	42%	39	39	54	39	45	44	36
The ineffective border wall	41	44	38	36	46	43	31	36
The wasteful border wall	33	39	31	17	33	33	33	28
The racist border wall	29	40	15	9	27	21	41	44
The harmful border wall	9	10	7	4	11	8	8	5

*White college graduates
**White non-college graduates

There are several ways to communicate about Trump's relationship with the wall. It's most persuasive to focus on his misplaced priorities rather than his prejudices.

Many Americans believe President Trump is racist, and some of his policies on immigration, such as family separation, are deeply unpopular. However, message testing in this survey suggests the arguments around race and values are not necessarily the most effective ones when it comes to the border wall policy.

To reach and persuade Americans who may be inclined to support a wall, but are not firmly decided, it can be more persuasive to emphasize the way the wall is an irrational fixation for the president – or even a "vanity project" – and bring in the arguments about the wall's ineffectiveness and cost as well as alternative solutions for the immigration system.

Don't let this become a debate between "The Wall" and "no border security."

Something else that is clear: progressives should not let the other side frame the debate as a choice between "the wall" on the one hand, and "nothing." This memo lays out effective arguments against the wall, but when framed as a choice between "A physical barrier along the entire U.S. border with Mexico" and "no increased border security," the public splits 52% to 33% for the wall. If a middle option is offered (in this case, "Smarter border security using technology instead of physical barriers"), it beats the wall, 48% to 35%. **An important takeaway: Americans doubt the effectiveness of the wall, and many who support the wall are quick to change their minds when presented with better approaches.**

Even if you don't agree with either side completely, who do you find more convincing:

Opponents of the border wall who say…	Advantage for wall opponents' argument	Supporters of the border wall who say…
Trump's fixation with the wall won't fix our broken immigration system. We need real solutions, like comprehensive immigration reform that provides stronger and smarter border security along with a path to citizenship for immigrants who meet certain criteria.	**51-36** (+15) ←	
The wall isn't really about border security any more. There are other border security measures we can agree on, but **Donald Trump is stuck on the wall because it's a vanity project**. He wants a monument to himself on the border so he can say he built it.	**52-38** (+14) ←	We need a wall for safety and security. We need the wall to stop the massive inflow of drugs, crime and human trafficking from Mexico, and Donald Trump is right to do whatever it takes to build it, even if that means going around Congress.
The wall is actually making us less safe by taking funds meant for military service personnel, disaster relief, construction at military bases, and fighting drug trafficking to build his border wall because Congress won't do what he wants.	**48-42** (+6) ←	
The wall is just another part of his cruel and inhumane immigration policies, like his policies to put kids in cages and separate families. People are right to take a stand against all of these policies and push for more humane immigration policy.	**45-39** (+6) ←	
The wall is a racist symbol that goes against everything America stands for. America is a nation made stronger by immigrants. We should embrace the values of the Statue of Liberty, welcoming people to this country, not a medieval concrete wall.	**42-44** (-2) →	

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About Navigator

In a world where the news cycle is the length of a tweet, our leaders often lack the real-time public-sentiment analysis to shape the best approaches to talking about the issues that matter the most. Navigator is designed to act as a consistent, flexible, responsive tool to inform policy debates by conducting research and reliable guidance to inform allies, elected leaders, and the press. Navigator is a project led by pollsters from Global Strategy Group and GBAO along with an advisory committee, including: Andrea Purse, progressive strategist; Arkadi Gerney, The Hub Project; Christina Reynolds, EMILY's List; Delvone Michael, Working Families; Felicia Wong, Roosevelt Institute; Mike Podhorzer, AFL-CIO; Jesse Ferguson, progressive strategist; Navin Nayak, Center for American Progress Action Fund; Ron Klain, Revolution; and Stephanie Valencia, Latino Victory Project; Symone Sanders, progressive strategist; Melanie Newman, Planned Parenthood.

To learn more about Navigator: http://navigatorresearch.org/

About the Study

Global Strategy Group conducted a public opinion survey among a sample of 1,500 registered voters conducted September 11-16, 2019. The survey was conducted online, recruiting respondents from multiple opt-in online panel vendors. Respondents were verified against a voter file and special care was taken to ensure the demographic composition of our sample matched that of the national registered voter population across a variety of demographic variables.