

**COVERING  
IMMIGRATION  
IN THE  
GOP  
PRESIDENTIAL  
PRIMARY**

**SUGGESTED GUIDELINES FOR MEDIA**

**AMERICA'S  
VOICE**

The 2024 Republican nominating contest won't be like previous iterations, and the media coverage of this campaign must respond accordingly. The Republican primary will present many challenges, but on issues of immigration and the border, the party has radicalized to a dangerous degree. While competitive presidential primaries are always raucous affairs filled with spin and slogans, the presidential candidates this cycle already have an established track record of intentionally spreading pernicious misinformation or flat-out lies around immigration and border issues. Several candidates have even adopted white nationalist conspiracy theories fueling active and direct threats to public safety. When presidential candidates are **no longer confronting and combatting** conspiracy theories, instead making them core to their campaign message, journalists play a critical role in communicating the truth to the American people through their coverage.

Since border and immigration issues remain a top issue for Republican primary voters and a top issue for the various campaigns, understanding of the nuance will be critical for informed coverage throughout the primary. This is especially the case as the candidates priorities are out of step with the majority of Americans who support protecting those fleeing violence and human rights abuses and want the creation of pathways to citizenship.

We expect that there will be a lot of disinformation and fear-mongering, thus it is critical that journalists covering this primary are accurate and responsible in their reporting, and that they do not replicate inaccurate messages and inadvertently amplify them, and avoid incendiary reporting that plays into stereotypes.

Below are some suggested guidelines for media outlets to provide informative coverage without unwittingly spreading misinformation.

## BEWARE OF MAINSTREAMING GOP EXTREMISM ON IMMIGRATION

- ◆ **Assign your extremism reporter to cover the debates:** This will not be a traditional presidential debate when it comes to issues of extremism and white nationalism. For months, we have been hearing **GOP presidential candidates** use extremist language that used to be relegated to the far reaches of white nationalist, racist and neo-nazi websites. That cannot be normalized. That is why media outlets should include coverage of the debate by their reporters who cover extremism, not just politics. We expect several, if not all, of the candidates on the debate stage to echo versions of the “great replacement” conspiracy theory, using the same kind of dangerous “invasion” language that was espoused by mass murderers in **Pittsburgh, El Paso, and Buffalo**. What they are saying is not far off from what the white nationalists in Charlottesville were chanting in August of 2017. If the candidate says the country is being invaded or there is a conscious effort to replace the white electorate of the country or certain states with non-white voters, does your reporting provide the necessary context on who has used those same ideas and how in the past?
- ◆ **Question the efficacy of strategy reliant on immigration:** While border and immigration issues may be a top concern for a sizable segment of GOP primary voters, the investment in a nativist messaging strategy has repeatedly **failed to deliver**

in general elections. There is also **evidence** that extremist positions adopted while competing in the primaries have been a liability in key battleground races. There are plenty of questions to be asked about the efficacy of the GOP campaigns' consistent commitment to elevating the issue.

- ◆ **Contextualize campaign surrogates and sources:** Gathering quotes and perspectives from campaign surrogates and supportive organizations may be important to a full article or segment, but viewers deserve to know the full context, especially as it relates to hate and extremism. Reporting showed that prior speechwriters for both **DeSantis** and **Trump** promoted white nationalist ideas. Meanwhile, other likely surrogates who are former Trump administration officials have gone on to spread white nationalist conspiracy theories and associated with anti-immigrant hate groups. This sort of background and context is critical when quoting them on the issue.

## QUESTION EXTREME POLICIES

- ◆ **Declaring an “invasion” is a white nationalist slogan:** Trump, DeSantis, and Pence have **all made** the white nationalist conspiracy theory that migrants seeking asylum and refugee in the United States constitute a literal “invasion” a central part of their immigration plans. This conspiracy has motivated multiple deadly attacks in **Pittsburgh**, **El Paso**, and **Buffalo**. DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas has **warned** that such rhetoric from leaders “fuels the threat landscape” his agency encounters. Experts and the research also agree that such militaristic, dehumanizing language creates a climate that encourages political violence. Declaring an “invasion” and thereby triggering certain Constitutional war powers for states - a legal theory peddled by some anti-immigrant advocates - has already been **refuted**.
- ◆ **Challenge the candidates' support for restarting family separation:** Several candidates have called for reinstating “zero tolerance,” which was the basis of the Donald Trump/ Stephen Miller horrific family separation operation in the summer of 2018. That policy led to widespread protest and condemnation throughout the country. Hundreds of children remain separated to this very day. The American Academy of Pediatrics **called** the family separation policy “torture” for good reason. But this policy was not successful in reducing forced migration, leaving plenty of questions about why these candidates are promising its return.
- ◆ **Contextualize the attack on birthright citizenship.** Donald Trump **announced** that on “day one” he would sign an executive order ending birthright citizenship for children of undocumented immigrants, a legally dubious proposal that attacks the 14th Amendment of the Constitution. 125 years ago, **Wong Kim Ark**, born in San Francisco to Chinese immigrants, fought to firmly establish that birthright citizenship is enshrined in the 14th Amendment. It was adopted by the United States after the Civil War to ensure that African-Americans were recognized as full U.S. citizens. While unlikely to come to fruition, the true egregiousness of this campaign promise from the presidential candidates who endorse this policy is important context for voters evaluating them.

- ◆ **Calls for going to war with Mexico or Mexicans:** The idea that the U.S. would send troops to invade and bomb areas in Mexico, is likely viewed as an absurdity by those not closely following this story. But many Republican politicians have suggested we “bomb” parts of Mexico or send in a detachment of the U.S. military to deal with the fentanyl crisis – it won’t. No one argues that cartels based in Mexico do not pose a threat, but adopting the position of going to war with one of the nation’s leading allies and our immediate neighbor is reckless and shockingly dangerous.

## PROVIDE FACTS; AVOID PARTISAN TALKING POINTS

- ◆ **Know the facts on fentanyl:** It’s established that over 90% of fentanyl is trafficked into the U.S. alongside commercial traffic at ports of entry, mostly by U.S. citizens. Fentanyl is indeed a very urgent and serious issue, but it is not an immigration issue. If someone is making a claim about immigrants and fentanyl, ask for evidence and ask what their solution is for this multifaceted issue. Look at their voting record, too. Tim Scott, for example, has been extremely critical of the Biden administration’s plan to tackle the fentanyl crisis, yet voted against critical funding to modernize ports of entry, along with most Senate and House Republicans at the time.
- ◆ **Look carefully at candidates’ “open border” claims:** CBP officials have testified under oath that nothing has changed since Biden took office, and the border is NOT open. CBP also made it crystal clear that the border is not open. Most of those crossing the border are seeking asylum, which is legal. Moreover, there is mounting evidence that the repeated open border disinformation has aided and abetted cartels.
- ◆ **Support for the Trump border wall:** Most Republican candidates will pledge their fealty to building Donald Trump’s ineffective and expensive border wall. For example, Tim Scott’s plan pledges to “restart construction to finish the border wall,” calling it an “absolute necessity,” and proposing to spend \$10 billion on its construction. But, any coverage should note that the border wall wasn’t based on policy, it was basically an anti-immigrant campaign chant. Now, it’s become standard policy for the GOP, despite the record that it’s an absolute waste. Numerous reports from throughout Trump’s presidency detailed how portions of his border monstrosity were felled by heavy winds and sliced through by \$100 saws available at commercial hardware stores, while contracts rewarded Republican donors and certain sectors of the wall were regularly opened up due to flood control considerations. Sections of the wall were ultimately breached thousands of times and the number of people injured by Trump’s wall and other barriers are mounting.
- ◆ **Immigrants are essential for our economy:** Look at the data and listen to the expert consensus; immigration is critical to a thriving U.S. economy, from essential work to job creation to the tax base. There are serious questions to be raised about the economic backlash to immigration policies being proposed in this primary. The real cost of Republican nativism is always immediately apparent and provides critical context

to this story. There's a growing **backlash from employers to Florida's anti-immigrant law**, which was championed by DeSantis. And, don't forget, Donald Trump **employed undocumented workers at many of his properties** and this was part of broader tax fraud schemes.

## ADD CONTEXT / DON'T DEHUMANIZE:

- ◆ **Statistics can only tell part of the story:** Reducing people purely to statistics can contribute to their overall dehumanization in the minds of the public. Who migrants are and why they come is an important and essential part of this story, to understand what types of policy interventions we need to implement. Yet, solutions will probably not be part of the presidential debate. It's important, when writing about the attacks by presidential candidates on asylum seekers and other migrants, to obtain quotes and background from the actual people they are attacking. Remember: these are human beings.
- ◆ **The truth is—Americans support asylum seekers and want to help:** It's critical to remember that **a majority of Americans support** protecting those fleeing violence and human rights abuses. Approximately 2 million American families **volunteered** to host asylum seekers. The overall 55-23% margin of support for asylum from recent polling by The Los Angeles Times and YouGov includes majorities of Democrats and Independents and a plurality of Republican respondents. **Nearly** three-quarters of Americans (73.4%) agree that the U.S. should provide access to the U.S. asylum system to people fleeing persecution and/or violence. **Poll** after **poll** shows majority of Americans also support a pathway to legalization, **particularly for beneficiaries of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program**. Additionally, the welcoming spirit and reception that Americans are demonstrating in border cities and around the country is an underreported part of this story.
- ◆ **Use accurate images:** If all of the images are of people in crisis, it reinforces the idea that they are a burden and an "other." It dehumanizes them. Many families have photos in their wallets or on their phones, especially of their children, just like we all do. Seeing those families that are just like our families is important in painting a picture of who they are.

Given that the GOP is using immigration as a political strategy to galvanize their base, how the media covers immigration matters more than ever. Journalists should focus on the facts, challenge extremist ideas, and not give a pass to candidates that are promoting dangerous positions that not only poison the well for policy solutions but are also out of step with American values. Most importantly, every reporter should ask what policy solutions are GOP candidates willing to commit to in order to address the very real and unavoidable challenge of global migration.