

G.O.P. Memo Shows Road Map for Attacking Democrats on Immigration

A document prepared by Representative Jim Jordan of Ohio shows how Republicans plan to weaponize the issue of immigration as part of their midterm campaign strategy.



By Annie Karni and Luke Broadwater

April 21, 2022

WASHINGTON — House Republicans are planning to use an oversight hearing next week to attack the Biden administration on its immigration policies, according to a memo obtained by The New York Times that offers a road map for how the G.O.P. intends to further weaponize an issue that is already a main thrust of their midterm campaign message against Democrats.

The detailed, 60-page guidance memo includes misleading and provocative talking points that seek to portray migrants and refugees as perpetrators of gruesome crimes, especially those involving sexual assault, echoing the language that former President Donald J. Trump used to denigrate immigrants. It also argues that the Biden administration has been lax on illegal immigration, seeking to put Democrats on the defensive on the issue.

It comes as Democrats are growing increasingly concerned that President Biden's immigration policies, including the recent decision to lift pandemic-era border restrictions next month, could pose a political liability for them ahead of the midterm elections.

The memo — which is marked “CONFIDENTIAL — FOR INTERNAL USE ONLY” — repeatedly insinuates that immigrants could be sex offenders, highlighting a handful of arrests at the southwestern border and of Afghan evacuees. It also misrepresents a Biden administration policy designed to humanely enforce immigration laws as one that would bar law enforcement from surveilling sex offenders near schoolyards.

Studies show that the estimated 40 million immigrants living in the United States commit crimes at rates far lower than native-born Americans.

Alejandro N. Mayorkas, the secretary of Homeland Security, is set to testify Thursday for the first time in front of the House Judiciary Committee, just as the administration is bracing itself for a surge of migrants expected to make asylum claims at the border in late May. That is when a public health rule limiting border crossings because of the pandemic, known as Title 42, is scheduled to be lifted, unleashing a two-year backlog of claims on top of the high volume of migrants who typically come to the southwestern border in the spring.

The memo for Republicans, prepared by Representative Jim Jordan of Ohio, the ranking member on the committee, details how the right plans to use the hearing to portray Democrats as pushing “far-left policies” that seek to abolish all immigration enforcement and even “encourage” illegal immigration.

While Mr. Jordan's memo was circulated confidentially among Republicans, he posted on Twitter that he planned to grill Mr. Mayorkas on Title 42 and other immigration issues.

A spokeswoman for the Department of Homeland Security did not respond to requests for comment about the upcoming hearing or the outlined lines of attack.

“Republicans continue to use immigration as a political cudgel to scare voters at every turn, knowing they have killed serious immigration reform at every turn,” said Kerri Talbot, deputy director for the Immigration Hub, a pro-immigrant organization. She ridiculed Republicans' immigration agenda, charging that “they want to build a \$15 billion wall that a \$15 handsaw can cut through.”

And she defended Mr. Biden's handling of the issue, saying his administration has a plan to manage the migration spikes “safely and in an orderly fashion.”

Many of the attack lines previewed in the memo are not new. Rather, they appear to be pulled from the same political playbook that Republicans have used in recent election cycles. In 2018, Mr. Trump embraced a dark, anti-immigrant message to energize conservative voters ahead of the midterm elections, raising concerns about caravans of migrants he claimed were dangerous making their trek to the southern border. The method yielded mixed results: Democrats retook control of the House that year, while Republicans gained seats in the Senate.

But Republicans have continued to hammer on an issue that not only instills fear but has the added appeal for them of causing a split within the Democratic Party. According to Mr. Jordan's memo, he plans to accuse the administration of prioritizing "illegal aliens over American citizens" by ending Title 42.

More than 100 mostly progressive Democrats have demanded that Mr. Biden lift the border restrictions, which they say his administration has used to abuse Black migrants, while centrist Democrats, including nearly a dozen in the Senate, have called for the restriction to stay in place.

White House officials have noted that ending the restriction simply means reverting to a standard immigration processing system that has been in place across multiple administrations. They have also pointed out that the result will be that more people are deported.

Still, the decision to end the pandemic-era border restrictions has sown worry among many Democratic lawmakers running for re-election in competitive districts. They have warned the administration that a surge in border crossings could feed voter anxiety in their districts about crime and chaos at the border.

Progressive Democrats counter that any effort to further extend the restrictions could depress turnout among Latino voters. In a recent poll conducted by the Immigration Hub, about 20 percent of Latino respondents said that immigration was the issue that would decide their vote.

Even in a political environment dominated by concerns about inflation and the rising price of gas, immigration remains a potent issue for voters across the board. Forty-one percent of Americans said they worried "a great deal" about illegal immigration, according to a recent Gallup poll.

At the same time, Mr. Biden and Democrats are dealing with pent-up anger among liberals about Mr. Trump's hard-line immigration policies, and pressure to reverse them at every opportunity.

"The same Democrats who conditioned their voters that stronger border protections were immoral now have little room to maneuver as progressives lash out," said Jack Pandol, communications director for the Senate Leadership Fund, a super PAC that aims to build a Republican majority. "It's an inescapable trap of their own creation."

White House officials said they see no option but to lift the pandemic-era restrictions, unless Congress passes legislation to extend them. But with Democrats divided over whether to do so, it is not clear whether there would be enough support for such a bill to pass, and party leaders are reluctant to bring up a measure that would infuriate their progressive supporters.

Efforts to pass a broad immigration overhaul that would legalize the status of millions of undocumented people have stalled amid Republican opposition, leaving few options for lawmakers to act.

"There are a range of other ideas of reforming our immigration system," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Wednesday, conceding that the immigration system in the United States is "broken."

"This would all require congressional action," she said. "We're happy to have that conversation with them."

But Mr. Jordan's document shows why such discussions have gone nowhere in Congress. It suggests that just months after Republicans joined Democrats in pushing for legislation to help rush to the United States thousands of Afghans who were facing retribution for having helped American troops, the G.O.P. is demonizing such refugees.