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## **Republicans bank on tough immigration line as US midterms near**

Jihan Abdalla

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**Washington, DC** – Some send thousands of migrants on buses and planes to Democratic-run states. Others air incendiary advertisements, calling migrants “invaders” and “criminals”, or pledge to invoke war powers to accelerate their expulsion.

As United States voters prepare to cast their ballots in critical midterm elections in November, Republicans have put immigration, as well as record-high numbers of arrivals at the country’s southern border, into sharp focus.

Political analysts say this Republican push is an effort to draw focus away from abortion rights, healthcare, and the environment – important concerns for Americans, and ones with which the party is less likely to win favour with voters.

“Republicans are looking to immigration as their saviour from other issues on which they think they’re losing,” said David Bier, associate director of immigration studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank.

“But immigration is also a real issue for them, where they have ideas about what they want to do if they were to get the authority,” Bier told Al Jazeera.

### Escalated rhetoric

In April, the Republican governor of Texas, Greg Abbott, began sending asylum seekers who arrived in his state by bus to Washington, DC, New York and Chicago to draw attention to high numbers of migrants crossing the southern border, which he has blamed on the policies of Democratic President Joe Biden.

Arizona Governor Doug Ducey later joined the effort, followed by the governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, who in mid-September put nearly 50 migrants on a plane to a wealthy island in Massachusetts.

Rights groups have slammed the practice, calling it political theatre and a cruel attempt to rally voters around immigration in advance of the November 8 midterms. Meanwhile, migrant advocates have mapped out hundreds of Republican election advertisements that have used terms such as “invasion” and “replacement” to refer to migrants.

Many of the political ads make false accusations that the Biden administration employs an “open borders policy”, while also promoting the false idea that migrants are responsible for bringing illicit drugs, specifically fentanyl, into the country.

These messages, said Zachary Mueller, political director of America’s Voice, an organisation that supports immigration reform in the US, have created a “spectre of fear” about asylum seekers and refugees who are mainly from Central America and have been fleeing poverty, violence, political persecution and climate change.

In a July [report](#), America’s Voice identified 121 political ads, 334 tweets and 91 campaign emails that referenced “white replacement” and “migrant invasion” in the 2022 election cycle.

Both terms are a reference to a false, white nationalist conspiracy theory that claims that global “elites” are deliberately replacing white people in the US with immigrants and people of colour.

“We’re seeing an increase in the embrace of white nationalist talking points, talking about replacement and invasion,” Mueller told Al Jazeera. “What we’ve seen this year is a real escalation in some of the rhetoric.”

Blake Masters, an Arizona Republican running for a US Senate seat, in his campaign advertisement falsely claimed that the US had “imported 20 million illegals” and given them amnesty.

Masters also said a “small group of elites” and Democrats are pushing for open borders that will “destroy this country”. “We are going to end this invasion,” he said. Masters is currently trailing Senator Mark Kelly, a moderate Democrat, according to the [latest polls](#).

### Turning words into policy

Hostile rhetoric against immigrants ramped up during the campaign of former President Donald Trump, a Republican, who on the day he announced his run for the presidency in 2015, called migrants coming from Mexico “rapists” and “criminals”.

During his time in office, Trump made restricting immigration into the US a core goal. He infamously put in place a policy that separated thousands of migrant parents from their children along the border; championed construction of the border wall with Mexico, and imposed “Title 42”, a pandemic health rule allowing US border agents to quickly expel most asylum seekers at the border, without giving them a chance to file a claim, among other measures.

While Trump is no longer in office, the rhetoric that he and his Republican colleagues advanced has continued – and there are signs that some of that messaging is getting through to Americans in the run-up to the midterms.

An NPR poll in August found that 53 percent of respondents believe it is either completely or somewhat true that there is an “invasion” at the southern border.

In some cases, the Republican Party’s hardline talk on immigration goes beyond words alone – and has translated into tough policies on the ground, said Fernando Garcia, executive director of Border Network for Human Rights, a rights group based in El Paso, Texas.

“In Texas, it’s not only about messaging. The narrative became a strategy and a state policy, which is Operation Lone Star,” said Garcia, referring to Governor Abbott’s \$4bn military campaign launched last year to counter border crossings. Under Operation Lone Star, thousands of state military troops were deployed along the border, and tens of thousands of migrants were apprehended.

Garcia said the policy has affected many US citizens and residents of border towns, particularly those of Latino descent, who are often profiled and pulled over by the troops. “That’s when a distortion becomes policy,” he told Al Jazeera.

#### Record-high arrivals

The Republican push on immigration also came amid less partisan criticism of how the Biden administration has handled the situation at the border, where US Customs and Border Protection has intercepted migrants more than two million times since October of last year.

Despite keeping Title 42 in place, the Biden administration has allowed more than one million people into the US to pursue asylum claims. Most of these asylum seekers have been from Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua – countries that the US does not maintain diplomatic relations with, or that Mexico has refused to take back.

“There is no doubt that the situation at the southern border is complicated and challenging and that many people have legitimate concerns about processing and how the federal government is responding,” said Aaron Reichlin-Melnick, policy director at the American Immigration Council.

“What there isn’t any empirical support for is the idea that the United States is at great risk of danger from people doing what they’ve been doing for centuries: coming here to save their lives,” Reichlin-Melnick told Al Jazeera.

The Biden administration announced on Wednesday an expansion of Title 42 to include Venezuelans, allowing them to be turned back at the US-Mexico border. The effort was coupled with a parole programme that would allow 24,000 Venezuelans to enter the country by air.”

Bier at the Cato Institute said part of the criticism stemmed from the fact that the Biden administration has failed to articulate a consistent message and policy for how to handle the border. According to a Reuters/Ipsos poll published on September 23, 50 percent of respondents said Biden should be doing more to prevent undocumented migrants from entering the country.

“Voters are concerned about border chaos when it’s a Republican president and when it’s a Democratic president,” Bier said. “Under Trump, they saw the chaotic situation of family

separation and they didn't like what they saw, and they are not supportive of a chaotic situation at the border now with all the people crossing and then released from custody.”

Still, there are indications that Republicans' messaging on immigration is not resonating with all GOP voters; the same Reuters/Ipsos poll found that 53 percent of Republicans supported sending migrants on board buses and planes to Democrat-run states, while 29 percent opposed it.

“The Republican Party thinks they can stir a space, a particular segment of the country, that feels that the border should be closed and non-citizens should be kept out and those who are here should be kicked out,” said Alberto Benitez, a law professor and director of the Immigration Clinic at George Washington University.

“[That's] a particular segment of the Republican Party base,” Benitez told Al Jazeera, “but it's a powerful segment.”