



Republicans Ramp up Immigration, ‘Open Borders’ Attacks as General Election Nears

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Even as Republican candidates continue to pummel incumbent Democrats on a faltering economy and sidestep anger over the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, they have launched a fresh salvo of attacks over immigration.

Last week, Republican Senate hopeful and former Attorney General Adam Laxalt tied his opponent, Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto (D-NV), directly to the Biden White House in a new TV ad accusing Democrats of “dismantling border security” and denying the existence of “open borders.”

That ad does not cite sources on those claims, though on his website, Laxalt has backed the completion of the Trump border wall and the reinstatement of the “Remain in Mexico” policy. His campaign did not respond to a request for more details on other policies he would support.

But Jeremy Hughes, a longtime Republican strategist in Nevada, told *The Nevada Independent* that the timing of a surge in migrants — alongside media attention generated by the push by some Republican governors to bus or fly migrants to Democrat-controlled “sanctuary” cities — has created another opportunity for the GOP to campaign on immigration, especially amid growing online interest in the issue.

There is no empirical evidence that immigration trends match with crime rates, and studies show undocumented immigrants are statistically less likely to commit crimes than citizens. However, the number of encounters at the U.S.-Mexico border have surged to record numbers in recent weeks, and increasingly large amounts of fentanyl have been seized by border authorities (though data shows much of those seizures come from legal border crossings and checkpoints).

Republican messaging on the border has been far more visible among the federal races, where Laxalt’s message has found purchase among his fellow congressional hopefuls.

In Congressional District 4, Sam Peters has long criticized border policies, calling it a “humanitarian crisis” that has exacerbated the opioid epidemic. In District 1, Republican Mark

Robertson's **ads** have tied border security to crime and drugs; and in District 3, April Becker **has said** that the border is "porous" and that "there's no security whatsoever."

Laxalt, Peters and **Becker** have also touted visits to the border.

Notably, however, Republican gubernatorial candidate Joe Lombardo, also the Clark County sheriff, has spent the post-primary period hammering his opponent on the economy, education and the **Northshore Labs controversy**.

In the GOP primary, Lombardo touted his record as **having deported "thousands" of undocumented immigrants**, amid attacks from his right flank that he had backed or supported "sanctuary" cities. (There are no sanctuary jurisdictions in Nevada, though Lombardo did preside over **the end of the so-called 287(g) cooperation agreement** between Las Vegas Metropolitan Police and Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in 2019.)

Laxalt's opponent, Cortez Masto, has rarely discussed immigration on the campaign trail and, since Democrats abandoned efforts to **undo Title 42** in the late spring, pivoting instead to the issue of abortion access. Title 42, **implemented under former President Donald Trump**, is an emergency health order that allowed immigration authorities to **expel migrants** amid the pandemic, spurring a **sharp increase** in repeat border crossings.

In Congress, she has backed Democratic spending bills that have **increased funding** for border agencies, including boosting ICE spending by 7 percent in 2022, and Customs and Border Protection spending by 26 percent.

Still, Laxalt has often sought to attack the lack of attention by Democrats on immigration, in part by highlighting his own trip to the U.S.-Mexico border. Speaking to **Fox News' Laura Ingraham** on Monday night, Laxalt said: "I've been to the border, my opponent hasn't gone to the border. In fact, she says there's no such thing as an open border."

Though Cortez Masto has not visited the border since Biden took office, she did visit as a senator during the Trump Administration, making trips in **2018** and **2019**.

Activists and analysts — including from the **libertarian Cato Institute** — have generally agreed that border policy under the Biden Administration does not constitute an "open border" as described by Republican candidates, in large part because the Biden White House has left many of the Trump Administration's policies intact.

Michael Kagan, a UNLV law professor and director of the UNLV Immigration Clinic, said that has come partly because efforts to restrict immigration under the Trump White House have more broadly created new baselines for public perceptions of immigration policy.

Case in point, Kagan said, is the failure of an effort earlier this year to repeal Title 42. That policy, initially justified as a measure that would curb the early spread of COVID in 2020, has also drastically reduced the number of immigrants admitted to the U.S. under asylum claims. When the

White House planned to end the program, vulnerable Democrats nationwide — including Cortez Masto, Rep. Susie Lee and Gov. Steve Sisolak — **balked**, and the rollback never came to pass.

“At best, [Title 42] was supposed to be exceptional and on an emergency basis,” Kagan said. “And yet, it’s treated now as de facto normal policy, so efforts to roll it back are treated like opening up the border in some shocking way, rather than just returning to normal.”

All the while, Kagan said that “chaos” at the border has created a policy quagmire for the Biden Administration, and one that “really nobody’s happy with.”