



Trump, allies use Mollie Tibbetts killing as rallying cry, but her family is not on board

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President Donald Trump and his Republican allies seem to be convinced there is political gold in the tragic death of Iowa college student Mollie Tibbetts — and they began mining for it as soon as her accused killer was identified as a Mexican immigrant.

And the Iowa State Medical Examiner's announcement Thursday that Tibbetts death was a "homicide resulting from multiple sharp force injuries" is likely to fuel more outrage.

Calling the nation's immigration laws a "disgrace," Trump at a Tuesday rally in West Virginia zeroed-in on Tibbetts rather than comment on the conviction of former campaign manager Paul Manafort or the guilty plea by his former fixer, Michael Cohen, which both happened earlier that same day.

"You heard about today with the illegal alien coming in very sadly from Mexico," he told the crowd at the Charleston Civic Center. "And you saw what happened to that incredible beautiful young woman."

Iowa's two Republican senators, Sens. Chuck Grassley and Joni Ernst, meanwhile said in a joint statement: "Too many Iowans have been lost at the hands of criminals who broke our immigration laws. We cannot allow these tragedies to continue."

And former Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich has declared on Fox News that "if Mollie Tibbetts is a household name by October, Democrats will be in deep trouble" come Election Day.

Another Fox News contributor, former GOP congressman Jason Chaffetz, has declared that Tibbetts' death would resonate with voters far more than the investigations into Trump's former cronies.

"Personally, I don't believe that the Cohen and Manafort story really moves the meter in one direction," said Chaffetz, who was filling in for Fox host Laura Ingraham. "But what will touch the hearts, what does touch people's emotion, is what happened to Mollie Tibbetts because they

can relate to her and she was murdered. All the polls are showing that the No. 1 issue is immigration."

Chaffetz did not specify which polls. But a [Reuters/Ipsos poll](#) conducted June 28 to July 2 found that immigration (15 percent) nudged out the economy (14 percent) and health care (12 percent) as the most important issue among U.S. voters.

That same poll, however, found that 52 percent of registered voters disapproved of the way Trump was handling the immigration issue.

Former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee echoed Chaffetz's remarks.

"There's not a lot of sympathy, even among Republicans, for Paul Manafort," he said on Fox News. "But all of us are attached to the unnecessary death of a young lady whose life was ahead of her and who's dead because we have broken immigration system. And I think the Republicans have a great opportunity to say, 'Let's fix this.'"

Asked by Chaffetz whether the GOP runs the risk of being accused of politicizing Tibbetts' death, Huckabee insisted Democrats politicized the high school massacre in Parkland, Florida, and "every shooting that happens."

But the GOP narrative is getting some pushback from some members of Tibbetts' family. Billie Jo Calderwood, who has been widely reported to be Mollie Tibbett's aunt, posted her dismay on [Facebook](#).

"Please remember Evil comes in EVERY color," she wrote in a post that has since been made private. "Our family has been blessed to be surrounded by love, friendship and support throughout this entire ordeal by friends from all different nations and races."

Sam Lucas, a distant cousin of the slain college student, was outraged by tweets from conservative commentator Candace Owens, which she said vilified immigrants and fired back with some [choice words of her own on Twitter](#).

"I was just like, 'Holy cow, my family just lost a member and this is the immediate response,'" Lucas told [The Washington Post](#).

Trump's rally remarks also got a lukewarm reception on Wednesday from the prominent Iowa Republican who employed the suspect on his family farm.

"I respect the president regardless of party," a clearly uncomfortable Craig Lang answered when asked if Trump was politicizing Tibbetts' death to push an anti-immigration agenda.

Criticism of attempts to politicize Tibbetts' murder also came from the Libertarian-leaning [Cato Institute](#) which noted that "the vast majority of research finds that immigrants do not increase local crime rates and that they are less likely to cause crime and less likely to be incarcerated than their native-born peers."

"This terrible murder is already feeding into a political firestorm," the Cato Institute's [Alex Nowrasteh](#) wrote. "People with a political axe to grind, those who want to distract from the

recent conviction of Paul Manafort and plea deal for Michael Cohen ... want to convict all illegal immigrants of this murder in the court of public opinion, not just the actual murderer."

It's not the first time Trump has seized on the death of a young woman to make his case for building a wall and cracking down on undocumented Mexican immigrants

As a presidential candidate, Trump repeatedly mentioned Jose Ines Garcia Zarate after he was charged with fatally shooting Kathryn Steinle in 2015 while she was strolling on a pier in San Francisco.

When Zarate was found not guilty last year, Trump called the verdict "disgraceful."

In the Tibbetts case, Cristhian Bahena Rivera, 24, was charged with first-degree murder Tuesday after the body of 20-year-old Tibbetts was found in a field east of her hometown, Brooklyn, Iowa.

In a court filing ahead of Rivera's first court appearance on Wednesday, his lawyer, Allan Richards, sought a gag order claiming that Trump and the federal government was promoting the idea that his client was in the country illegally.

Richards' motion was denied. And in an interview with NBC News on Thursday, Richards was evasive when asked for proof that Rivera was in the U.S. legally.

"The proof would be, he's been in the community for seven years, working 12 hours a day, seven days a week," he said.

Michael Bars, a spokesman for the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, said, "We have found no record in our systems indicating he has any lawful immigration status."

Lang's son, Dane, said earlier that Rivera used a different name when he applied for a job on the farm four years ago. He said the Social Security card and Iowa state identification Rivera produced checked out when they ran them by the Social Security Administration.