



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

**DEMOCRATS WILL LOSE ELECTIONS IN 2022 AND 2024
IF THEY DO NOT OFFER A PLAUSIBLE STRATEGY FOR
REDUCING THE SURGE OF IMMIGRANTS AT THE BORDER.**

BY
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DEMOCRATS WILL LOSE ELECTIONS IN 2022 AND 2024 IF THEY DO NOT OFFER A PLAUSIBLE STRATEGY FOR REDUCING THE SURGE OF IMMIGRANTS AT THE BORDER.

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Democratic officeholders and candidates who plan to run in 2022 and 2024 need to face a simple, brutal fact – many will lose their next elections and will return control of government to the GOP if they do not offer a more plausible strategy for reducing the surge of immigrants at the border than the ambivalent, and contradictory set of policies that Biden and the administration have been offering since the election.

These policies and messages have tried to somehow “split the difference” between promising migrants more humane treatment and yet at the same time discourage any substantial increase in immigration. Unless the flow of migrants actually stabilizes and then begins to decline in the coming months, which it is extremely unlikely to do, this position will become increasingly untenable.

As Ruy Teixeira says:

Democrats moving forward have to accept the reality of American public opinion and politics that border security is a huge issue that cannot be avoided in any attempt to reform the immigration system. Indeed, the **most popular** part of the current immigration bill is the provision most directly related to border security (technologically enhanced port of entry screening) according to Morning Consult. And public opinion **polling over the years** has consistently shown overwhelming majorities **in favor** of more spending and **emphasis** on border security.

The public has indeed become more sympathetic to immigrants and immigration, partially as a thermostatic reaction to the practices of the Trump administration. But that does not mean that Democrats can simply be the opposite of Trump on this issue. He was closed; we're open! He was mean; we're nice!...voters want an immigration system that is both reasonably generous and humane **and under control**. *Democrats ignore the “under control” part at their peril.*¹

Many Americans do genuinely sympathize with immigrants and recognize that violence, disastrous crop failures and depressed economic conditions are the fundamental forces driving the vast migration to the border. But this does not lead them to support the call for “open borders” or

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¹<https://washingtonmonthly.com/2021/03/04/the-democratic-road-forward-on-immigration/>

make them willing to passively accept a major, constant increase in the flow of migrants in the coming months and years.

It is necessary to face the basic reality: To have any chance of surviving in 2022 and 2024, Democratic candidates in many districts across America will need to have a convincing political alternative to the GOP's demonization of immigrants – a plausible alternative that goes beyond "The GOP is mean, we're nice."

Let's begin with a basic fact: It is not just racists who oppose "open borders." That's the easy answer but it simply isn't right.

There are two "common sense" objections to allowing vast numbers of migrants to freely cross the border – objections that are shared by vast numbers of non-racist voters.

1. The government has a responsibility to take care of Americans first.

Millions of Americans have suffered and are still suffering from the pandemic. Many are ill, jobless or deeply in debt. To many Americans it therefore seems profoundly unfair that government resources should be going to the border to provide aid and improve the conditions for foreign immigrants when millions of American citizens right now desperately need aid and support.

Opinion polls consistently show that this is a widely shared view among all but the most firmly progressive voters and every political candidate who has conducted focus groups among his or her voters has felt the fierce passion and anger that this issue provokes. Stan Greenberg, who has conducted by far the most extensive field research on this issue over the years, involving literally dozens of focus groups, has found again and again that this issue provokes the deepest and most passionate response. Even before the pandemic one working class woman in a focus group put it as follows:

"In America we have hungry, we have veterans, we have mental illness, we have so many problems in our own country that we at this point in time just can't be concerned with, I feel bad but...our country's in dire straits financially." "I mean we need to take care of home first. We need to take care of the veterans, we need to take care of the elderly, we need to take care of the mentally ill, we need to take care of everyone instead of us worrying about other people in other countries, we need to take care of our house first. [Get our house in order and then we'll help you.](#)"²

2. The more humanely that immigrants are treated at the border, the more immigrants will come.

Some argue that the immigrants at the border are all escaping either death threats and gang violence or literal starvation and therefore have absolutely no alternative but to flee their homes and countries. But the reality is that many, particularly young men and families, are not fleeing specific threats of death, kidnapping or starvation but are rather economic migrants seeking a better life.

²https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_levison_WWC_immigration_discussion.pdf

This does not make them bad people – on the contrary, the majority are like the vast numbers of the honest, hardworking immigrants who have come to America in previous decades and who now mow our lawns, wash our dishes and work in our poultry and meat-packing plants. Choosing to seek a better life rather than struggling to scratch out a living with subsistence agriculture is a completely understandable decision.

To clearly visualize why vast numbers of migrants will accept the very substantial risks and financial sacrifices that trying to cross the border entails, imagine a young man who lives in a declining rust belt or Appalachian small town today and who is unable to find any job that pays more than \$12 or \$13 an hour for unskilled work but who could immediately make \$90 an hour by sneaking into Canada to do manual work like dishwashing, yard work, or other manual labor.

To many Americans it will seem implausible that a wage differential this large could actually exist between the United States and Central America but it is quite literally the economic reality a Guatemalan youth or man with a family now perceives at the [current exchange rate between the U.S. dollar and the Central American currencies](#).³ When one adds to this scenario the idea that these potential migrants already have relatives living in Montreal or Toronto who have promised to help them find a job and a place to stay when they arrive, the simple reality is that, even with a higher cost of living in Canada, these U.S. migrants would still be able to support themselves and their family in Canada far better than in the U.S. and would also be able to send substantial amounts of money to their parents and relatives back home.⁴

Making this choice does not make migrants seeking a better life “bad people” for choosing to try to cross the border but at the same time it is simply incorrect to equate them with the refugees who are actually fleeing specific threats of death or kidnapping by criminal gangs.

Many progressives, however, seeing the images of the appalling conditions on the border, are unwilling to make this distinction and argue that America can handle even a major influx of migrants and that simply as a matter of humanitarian sympathy we should be willing to allow all the destitute people on the border to come in, even if it inspires others to follow them.

There is an ethical argument that can be made for this position but for political candidates the reality is clear – in a vast number of districts across America, refusing to support the goal of controlling the border will produce a huge and in many cases fatal loss of support. The truth is that only Democrats in “deep blue” districts will seriously believe that they can win elections with a complete “Open Borders” platform.

What Democratic candidates need is an alternative to the GOP strategy that treats the immigrants themselves as criminals – a perspective that does not demonize immigrants but which offers a plausible, serious strategy to significantly reduce illegal immigration.

The key to this strategy is for Democratic candidates to say the following:

³“Guatemalans can multiply their purchasing power almost seven times by working in the United States and sending their wages home, researchers from Harvard University, the World Bank and the Center for Global Development reported this year.” <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/11/04/migrant-debt-cycle/?arc404=true>

⁴Articles advising retirees on living costs in other countries inform them that they can live quite comfortably on \$1500 a month in Central America, an income that equates to earning around 10 dollars an hour in America.

Immigration is not just a flow of individuals walking across Mexico. It is also a multi-billion dollar criminal business that involves thousands of workers and vast profits. It employs rumor mongers, con-men, drivers, scouts, coordinators, bribers, high tech surveillance equipment, night vision scopes, 2-way walkie talkies, telescopes, safe houses, cars, trucks, boats, radio stations and rural development banks.

A [Rand Corporation study](#) concluded the following:

We developed a preliminary estimate of aggregate revenue from smuggling unlawful migrants from [Central America] to the United States that ranges from about \$200 million to \$2.3 billion in 2017... Likewise, we produced an ancillary and still preliminary estimate of drug-trafficking transnational criminal organizations' tax, or "piso", collections that also spanned an order of magnitude, from about \$30 million to \$180 million.⁵

As the last sentence suggests, the human smuggling industry is now heavily interconnected with the major drug cartels. As an article in the Texas Tribune noted:

The cartel began trafficking booze across the border during Prohibition before switching to narcotics decades ago. More recently, it has increasingly turned to human cargo for a variety of macroeconomic and geopolitical reasons. Marijuana-legalization efforts have driven down prices in the U.S., while periodic crackdowns on border crossings over the past 15 years have driven up the amount the cartel can charge migrants for allowing them safe passage...

In Mexico's gulf region it is possible that "human smuggling" rather than drug smuggling has become the regional cartel's [main business](#):

With U.S. marijuana prices down and much of Mexico's cocaine moving through other routes, Ramon says migrants have become the Gulf Cartel's main profit center. The cartel tells him whom he can take across and when, and charges him \$1,200 per migrant for the privilege of using its territory. "Everything is controlled by the cartel," Ramon says. "Since drugs aren't booming, their business now is also people. ... It gives them more profit. It's easy money and fast."⁶

As a result, the first "sound-bite" that Democratic candidates can use in their ads, speeches and debates is the following:

"Any serious proposal to control our borders has to attack the vast, multi-billion dollar "human smuggling" industry. I have a plan to do this, my opponent does not. His only strategy is to just call immigrants nasty names."

Among many Latin Americans there has always been a certain reluctance to portray the "people smugglers" as "bad guys" This attitude goes back to the 1980's and 1990's when the border was much easier to cross and most "coyotes", as the people smugglers were called, were just neighbors in the local community who knew places where one could easily cross into the U.S.

⁵https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2800/RR2852/RAND_RR2852.pdf

⁶<https://www.texastribune.org/2019/03/07/migration-us-border-generating-billions-smugglers/>

But as crossing the border became much more dangerous and difficult, more organized criminal groups with connections to the cartels took an increasingly large role. The human smuggling gangs today play a vastly darker role than they did in the past.

Trapping Migrants in a Cycle of Debt

For one thing, the increasingly large cost of crossing the border leaves many families bankrupt and trapped in a permanent cycle of debt.

Here is one detailed story that is worth understanding in detail.

Making \$13 a day as a construction worker, [Carlos] could barely afford to take care of his wife and daughter, let alone help his parents buy medicine for a range of ailments including diabetes, high blood pressure and thyroid disease. Plus, the street violence that has ravaged Honduras hit too close to home a few years ago, when a cousin was murdered by suspected drug traffickers.

So last year, Carlos, 25, did what most Hondurans do when it's time to get out: He approached one of the three local smugglers who operate in rural San Francisco de la Paz, which has a population of about 20,000. The smuggler gave him a price: \$7,000 to cross the Rio Grande and seek asylum – but only if he took his little girl and they surrendered to the U.S. Border Patrol on the other side. Otherwise it would cost \$10,000 to traverse Mexico and then evade a gantlet of law enforcement at the border and the interior checkpoints beyond.

It's a system that runs on people like Carlos and his family, who are willing to carve up their meager assets to pay off a sophisticated network of smugglers, cartels, stash houses, drivers and lookouts. "It's like a cake," a coyote who goes by the nickname Sultan said in an interview. "Everyone gets their little piece."

In Honduras, Sultan's piece of the cake is big money. He estimates he makes \$700 to \$800 a head on his clients, which can add up to around \$3,000 every two weeks — a small fortune in Central America.

Although taking his daughter offered a steep discount, Carlos and [his wife] Claudia still didn't have the money to pay off their smuggler, who wanted roughly half his \$7,000 fee up front to get the pair to Reynosa, a Mexican city just across the Rio Grande from McAllen. The other half would help pay off the Gulf Cartel, a crime syndicate that charges a "tax" of \$1,000 to \$1,500 per person to let migrants cross its territory.

Carlos was counting on a network of friends and family to help him pull together the money once he got to the border. But that still left him more than \$3,000 short of the up-front cost. So Claudia was stunned when Carlos came home early from his construction job and asked her to start packing a bag for their daughter. ...

"How did you get the money?" Claudia asked. He told her the coyote had offered to take them on credit, backed by a relative's land. Carlos would pay back the money once he started working in the U.S.

After a [harrowing journey](#) that finally got them to the U.S their problems were not over.

...It's unclear how Carlos' family will pay off the \$3,000 they owe the coyote and the \$2,000 they owe the loan shark while still affording medicine and food. The family is paying roughly \$80 a month toward interest on the loan, but if they don't pay it off by May, they will lose the house. Meanwhile, Claudia worries that Carlos will be ordered deported before he can pay everything off. With debts looming, Carlos and his daughter recently moved to Florida in search of more steady work.⁷

Promoting False Rumors

As this makes clear, modern coyotes are not humanitarians but quite cynical businessmen who want to increase their traffic. As a result, they use many dishonest methods to "sell" their services. The more entrepreneurial have used radio stations, billboards and social media to promote migration even when they knew that the odds of successfully crossing the border were low and would bankrupt their clients.

And in fact, on two previous occasions, the lies that human smugglers circulated have had especially destructive consequences:

1. In the past decade human smugglers repeatedly circulated the myth that anyone who arrives at the border with children could automatically enter the U.S. – and on this basis thousands of immigrants came with their small children, something that they would not have done in the past. This was in fact one of the central myths that was circulated among the caravans and busloads of migrants who only discovered it was not true when it was too late and they were trapped in squalid refugee camps on the Mexican side of the border. After months of living in conditions that were worse than those that they had fled, including rape and kidnapping, many gave up and returned to their homelands having sold their land and placed themselves deeply in debt for nothing.
2. Beginning several years ago people smugglers began telling people that they were guaranteed to get into the U.S. if they claimed the right of asylum. Smugglers rehearsed with their clients the precise legal phrases to use that would obligate border authorities to accept them as seeking asylum. It was unquestionably a clever strategy but the result has been to overload the asylum system with delays of several years before a hearing. The result is that thousands of people with genuine and legitimate claims cannot have their appeals evaluated.

As Fareed Zakaria says:

The truth is the asylum system is out of control. The concept of asylum dates to the years after World War II, when the United States created a separate path to enter the country for those who feared religious, ethnic or political persecution — a noble idea born in the shadow of the United States' refusal to take in Jews in the 1930s. It was used sparingly for decades, mostly applying to cases of extreme discrimination. But the vast majority of

⁷<https://www.texastribune.org/2019/03/07/migration-us-border-generating-billions-smugglers/>

people entering the southern border are really traditional migrants, fleeing poverty and violence. This is a sad situation, but it does not justify giving them special consideration above others around the world who seek to come to the United States for similar reasons – but patiently go through the normal process.”⁸

The result is that people with genuine, personal fears of assassination or kidnapping are trapped together with others who are not actually fleeing the direct threat of extortion or murder. There is nothing noble or admirable about the people smugglers having achieved this result.

And right now the human smugglers are promoting a third deeply destructive myth – the myth that Biden has completely opened the border. Many journalistic reports in the last several months have described migrants heartbreaking reactions when they discover they have been deceived.

As CNN notes:

In recent weeks, migrants waiting in various northern Mexican cities have been told to travel to other locations along the border under the false pretense that they’ll be let into the US through a port of entry there...Other messages, shared via the popular messaging app WhatsApp, have falsely told migrants who fall under the Trump administration’s so-called **“remain in Mexico”** policy that they’ll be allowed to enter the US on a certain date and directed them to present themselves to border officials on that date...Misinformation is spreading along the US-Mexico border, through smugglers or word of mouth, among migrants desperate for answers from the Biden administration, undermining the administration’s **plans for the US-Mexico border** and fueling confusion in border communities.⁹

Finally, the human smugglers do not care but the fact is that right now they are materially contributing to the 2022 and 2024 electoral victory of Donald Trump’s extremist, bitterly anti-immigrant coalition which will be the worst possible outcome for every class of migrant including the vast number of “dreamers” for whom there is now substantial sympathy but who will be cast into limbo once again if the GOP regains control.

So what specific policies can Democratic candidates suggest that will make sense to voters and put GOP on the defensive?

The key is that the GOP, needing to mobilize its racist supporters, will want to concentrate on demonizing the ordinary immigrants themselves as rapists and drug dealers rather than focus on the human smuggling networks. Democrats should therefore powerfully insist on precisely this distinction, demanding that sensible people focus on the criminal networks and not the pathetic victims.

⁸https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/biden-wants-to-reform-immigration-trumps-legacy-is-in-the-way/2021/03/11/ded049ac-82a9-11eb-81db-b02f0398f49a_story.html?fbclid=IwAR0uUqaHhliglP6sBA8Zh7A7Xrycq7ATrYAR2hFZjiNQXJVD4XOpnZ9LSiQ

⁹<https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/10/politics/immigration-biden-misinformation/index.html>

Here are four specific policies Democrats can propose:

1. Disrupt the financial networks of the human smugglers.

Vastly extend the use of existing U.S. laws to freeze and confiscate the U.S. assets of the criminal groups. Many of the mid-level and higher-level participants in the criminal networks have houses, cars and bank accounts on the U.S. side of the border that can be seized and subjected to asset forfeiture.

The [Rand study](#) suggests:

Although targeting might be difficult, DHS could consider expanding existing efforts to investigate payments made to human smugglers, especially in the United States, and working more closely with formal and informal banking services to identify suspicious payments. DHS could also consider expanding current efforts to work with foreign law enforcement partners to disrupt smuggling operations.¹⁰

2. Increase the legal penalties for human smuggling

As an [article in the L.A. Times](#) notes:

For their part, traffickers on the U.S. side of the border are drawn to the market not only for the profits but also because they face more lenient penalties for smuggling humans than they do for smuggling narcotics. Emilio Trejo Jr., who spent nearly 12 years in federal prison for trafficking cocaine in 2004, is now serving just 30 months for transporting undocumented migrants. He was caught in late 2017 at a Border Patrol checkpoint with 25 people hiding between boxes of produce in the back of his refrigerated tractor-trailer.¹¹

3. Apply financial pressure on the Latin American media (radio stations, TV stations, social media companies, etc.) that spread the human traffickers' immigration falsehoods.

Call on U.S. companies to withdraw their advertising from these media groups and threaten to call for consumer boycotts of products advertised on these media. Use every avenue to make these companies aware that promoting false news about immigration will result in serious consequences for them. As some of these companies are actually headquartered or have major subsidiaries in the U.S., the opportunities for pressure are substantial.

4. Change bank and lending procedures in these countries – take steps to insure that business or agricultural loans are used for economic development, not to fund migration.

An article in the Washington Post vividly described the problem today:

Access to credit has helped make [Guatemala] the largest single source of migrants to the United States over the past year. About 2 percent of the population has been apprehended at the U.S. border since 2018.

¹⁰https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2800/RR2852/RAND_RR2852.pdf

¹¹<https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2021-01-20/trump-immigration-border-wall-issues-test-biden-policies>

It has also had devastating consequences for those who fail in their journeys — those who are deported before they earn enough to pay back their loans. They become ensnared by debt, losing savings, businesses and homes, which makes them more likely to try to migrate again.

...Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, development organizations devoted growing resources to what advocates called “access to credit” or “financial inclusion.” Microfinance became a crowded, fiercely competitive market. Some cooperatives put out slick television advertisements with actors. More billboards with catchy slogans appeared: “We believe in you!” and “Multiply your investment!” But in most cases, they were for-profit endeavors, which could seize the property of debtors who defaulted.

The Post story presented one particular case:

...Ceto did what aspiring migrants here have done for years. He went to the local branch of Banrural. He told a loan officer that he needed the money to improve his family farm. He presented his family’s land deed as collateral. Within a week, he was holding a plastic bag full of cash.

After crossing the border he was apprehended by the U.S. Border Patrol south of Houston and deported within days.

Banrural had given Ceto six months to repay his loan, at a monthly interest rate of 1.5 percent, before it would seize his property. So he did what many do: He took out another loan. He borrowed \$6,500, from another major Guatemalan bank, Bantrab, to pay off the first loan....Raymundo’s wife, Sabina Ceto took out more small loans and fell deeper into debt. They borrowed about \$2,000, from Banrural and \$1,300, from Compartamos, a Mexican bank. Sabina Ceto lied to her loan officer; she said she needed the money for a family business. She enlisted six female relatives to apply for their own loans, each for about \$150.

...the Raymundo family now rents a small house with no running water for \$100 per month. Even after losing their home, they still have more to pay back — they’re on the hook for about a dozen loans from three financial institutions. Most of the time, they try to cut costs by limiting themselves to two meals a day.

“The easiest way out of this is to migrate again,” said Raymundo. “But I’ve already been deported, so what we’re thinking now is that maybe my wife would go with our daughter.”¹²

Shifting the Political Debate

The GOP will, of course, try to switch the discussion to demonizing the immigrants themselves or falsely claiming that under Trump the problem had actually been solved. But what are their real, specific alternatives? To separate families once again? To build internment camps for immigrants like those that were constructed for Japanese and other Asian-Americans during World War II? To rant about drug dealers, terrorists and rapists?

¹²<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/11/04/migrant-debt-cycle/?arc404=true>

Here is how Democratic candidates can aggressively re-frame the debate:

Immigration is not just a flow of individuals walking across Mexico. It is also a multi-billion dollar criminal business that involves thousands of workers and vast profits. It employs rumor mongers, con-men, drivers, scouts, coordinators, bribers, high tech surveillance equipment, night vision scopes, 2-way walkie talkies, telescopes, safe houses, cars, trucks, boats, radio stations and rural development banks.

“Any serious proposal to control our borders has to attack the vast, multi-billion dollar “human smuggling” industry. I have a serious four-point plan to do this, my opponent does not. His only strategy is just to call immigrants nasty names.”

The way to reduce illegal immigration is to reduce the flow before immigrants reach the border. Attacking the human smuggling industry will do this. Separating families or forcing people to live in tents on the border will not.

In the long run the only real solution to the immigration problem is to improve the conditions in the immigrants’ home countries. The administration is working on this approach but it is a long-term task. Attacking the human smuggling industry is a strategy that will produce results and that we can apply right now.

An aggressive campaign along these lines will not prevent all losses in 2022 but it can make a substantial difference. It does not demonize the immigrants themselves but still suggests a militant and forceful approach. It allows a Democrat to be genuinely sympathetic to the immigrants themselves but still present a “tough” and realistic approach to the border and what will be required to get it back under control. This is the balance that most Americans want to see achieved.