



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

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BY
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The popular resistance movement that has emerged in major cities to challenge ICE is the most impressive and dedicated display of nonviolent mass action since the height of the Civil Rights Movement. But as attention turns to considering how to actually build a majority coalition against mass deportation, an important debate has emerged about the right slogan and strategy – a debate that echoes the conflict over the demand to “defund the police” after the killing of George Floyd. Advocates say that the increasing popularity of the slogan “abolish ICE” indicates that this is now the best demand to support. Before the shooting of Renee Good and Alex Pretty this was a minority position but it is now argued to be rapidly gaining support.

And it is indeed a fact that in late January and early February of this year there was a rapid and dramatic growth of opinion expressing clear and fierce disapproval of a wide range of ICE’s thuggish actions and behavior as the impact of the two totally unjustified shootings sunk in.

But advocates insist that backing now also exists to support the demand to “abolish ICE” as well. They point to a January 25th YouGov poll that showed more Americans now say they would support abolishing ICE than oppose eliminating it – by a margin of 46 to 43% (although, realistically, this 3% difference is within the poll’s margin of error). Two other polls in Late January and early February showed similar results that were also within the polls margin of error – by 42 to 45% and 46 to 47%.¹

But other poll questions that ask more specific questions raise significant doubts about whether there actually is majority support for literally “abolishing” ICE as opposed to significantly and profoundly reforming it.

1. A January 1-28th 2026 Marquette Law School poll showed that 54% of the respondents agreed that ICE should “enforce immigration laws to remove illegal immigrants” and 56% supported “deporting immigrants who are living in the us illegally.” This echoes the results of polls conducted in November and December.²
2. A January 28th poll from the Searchlight Institute provided respondents with a four part choice:
 - a. Get rid of ICE – 19%
 - b. Replace ICE – 9%

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¹<https://today.yougov.com/politics/articles/53939-more-americans-support-than-oppose-abolishing-ice-immigration-minneapolis-shooting-poll>

²<https://law.marquette.edu/poll/2026/02/04/new-marquette-law-school-national-survey-finds-60-disapprove-of-the-work-of-ice-with-democrats-and-independents-opposed-to-ice-and-republicans-in-favor/>

- c. Reform ICE – 30%
- d. Make no change or increase ICE funding – 27%
- e. No opinion – 15%

This indicates that only around 28% actually supported completely abolishing or replacing ICE.³

3. A three-part question on a January 23-26 Fox news poll showed that 36% favored abolishing ICE, 42% opposed abolishing ICE and 22% said they didn't know enough to have an opinion.⁴

Other polling supports this view.⁵

This strongly indicates that abolishing ICE cannot now be described as actually being the position of a majority of the American people. But advocates hope that as the killings of Renee Good and Alex Pretty sink in with more and more Americans, that they will come to support abolition.

Others, however, disagree. They point out that when dramatic events occur, people will often “vent” their immediate anger at the events on opinion polls (a response that is technically called “*expressive responding*”) which temporarily distorts long term trends. A similar pattern occurred with the slogan “*defund the police*” which grew in popularity in early 2020 immediately after the killing of George Floyd but then gradually declined as time went on.

In this view unless there are a continuing series of outrages like the January executions opinions will stabilize at a somewhat lower level than they stand today. There is, therefore, not actually a solid majority for completely abolishing ICE rather than a more a more realistic strategy to demand major constraints on ICE's behavior instead.

The Larger Sociological Context – The Role of Social Class

But arguably more important, both of these approaches ignore the larger sociological context in which public opinion on the specific issue of immigration is embedded. The conventional view in political science and political campaign management is that although voters' opinions are often viewed as fitting into a broad “*liberal-moderate-conservative-extremist*” continuum, specific opinions on particular political “issues” are largely held in distinct mental compartments and can therefore be analyzed in isolation from broader social views. Political analysts are even now beginning to conduct extensive opinion polling that compares the relative popularity of different lists of proposed reforms of ICE. These will then be incorporated into political platforms for candidates based on this information.

But the fundamental fact is that voters' specific views on immigration are actually deeply shaped by and embedded in two broader social class perspectives that profoundly differ between educated, white collar urban voters on the one hand and working class, rural and small-town voters on the other.

³<https://www.searchlightinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/ICE-Memo-Toplines-Searchlight-Immigration-Survey.pdf>

⁴<https://www.foxnews.com/politics/fox-news-poll-59-voters-say-ice-too-aggressive-up-10-points-since-july>

⁵<https://navigatorresearch.org/all-eyes-are-on-ice/>

Among many educated, urban, liberal voters, migrants are seen as being among the victims of injustice along with other groups like people of color, women and gays. This deep interconnection between different social issues is perhaps most vividly illustrated by the widespread yard signs in Democratic neighborhoods that assert that *"In this house we believe that: no human is illegal"* along with similar slogans asserting anti-racist, anti-sexist, pro environmental and other liberal views.

In contrast, in this perspective most whites are basically seen as the being in varying degrees the beneficiaries of "white privilege." Since the election of Donald Trump white working class voters in particular have become widely viewed to one degree or another as basically pro-MAGA right wingers who are infected with various degrees of racism and extremism.

But, in fact, there is actually a significant sector of non-elite white working class and rural small town people who are actually more accurately seen as potentially persuadable non-MAGA voters. The key to understanding this group is to grasp that their specific views about migrants are deeply embedded in two broader class perspectives (for a fuller discussion see the articles listed in the sidebar on this page).

1. Cultural Traditionalism

There is a basic social ethos and personal philosophy that is shared by many working class and rural Americans, both MAGA and non-MAGA. It is properly defined in sociological terms as "cultural traditionalism," a series of "old-fashioned" personal values – a belief in individual responsibility, hard work, honesty, family, military service, support for law and order, patriotism, individual freedom and religious faith.

It is critical to note that these culturally traditional values and beliefs are not inherently Republican or ideologically conservative. The culturally traditional outlook described above was part of working class "real American" values in the 1950s and early 1960s when 60% of workers voted for Democrats and a majority of blue-collar workers were members of unions. At the same time, however, there are two clusters of social attitudes that clearly distinguish MAGA from non-MAGA working class voters.

The first is a basic outlook that tends toward tolerance and empathy. It is generally linked to a more "easy going," "live and let live" personal psychology and is most often supported by the many varieties of compassionate Christianity that are still common in working class churches. Although this point of view is generally unfamiliar to the highly educated, Jimmy Carter was a distinct example of this "liberal" variety of

There is a sector of working class voters who can be persuaded to vote for Democrats in 2024 – but only if candidates understand how to win their support.

https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Levison_sector_WCvoters_2024.pdf

The recently published book, *Rust Belt Union Blues*, by Lainey Newman and Theda Skocpol represents a profoundly important contribution to the debate over Democratic strategy.

https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Levison_Rust_Belt_book_vf.pdf

A Serious, Step by Step political strategy for regaining support from a pivotal group of white working class voters who now support the GOP.

https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_white_papers/tds_SWP_Levison_Step_by_Step_strategy_WWClass.pdf

A Democratic Political Strategy for Reaching Working Class Voters That Starts from the Actual "Class Consciousness" of Modern Working Americans.

https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_levison_Working_Class_Consciousness.pdf

The culturally traditional but non-extremist working class voters: who they are, how they think and what Democrats Must Understand to regain their support. https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_levison_culturally_traditional_WWC_voters_v2.pdf

small town/working class Christian faith. These working-class voters consciously reject explicitly racist or bigoted views and sincerely express the belief that people should be judged as individuals not by race or ethnicity.

2. Class Discontent and Social Injustice.

In the non-MAGA working class perspective it is not just “woke elitists” or the Democrats alone but “the system” as a whole is unjust to the “little guy”. It holds that ordinary people always get screwed and modern America has become deeply unfair to people who hold traditional values and “*play by the rules.*”

In the 1950s and 1960s American workers perceived the post-War II “deal” between business and labor as fundamentally “fair.” Successful businessmen, professionals and wealthy people were seen as basically deserving the greater wealth and income that they received as part of a “deal” that also provided a decent life for a working-class person who was willing to work hard and “play by the rules”.

As deindustrialization spread across the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, however, a vast number of working-class cities and towns in the industrial states became virtual ghost towns as businesses closed, social services shrank and downtown areas declined. Mining towns in the Appalachian region and logging towns in the Pacific Northwest experienced a similar fate. As workers competed for the declining number of working-class jobs and faced the growing decay in these areas they became increasingly convinced that the Democrats who had previously championed them had abandoned them.

The sociologist who has most vividly described this feeling is Arlie Hochschild. In her book, *Strangers In Their Own Land*, she defines this narrative as a “Deep Story.”

Think of people waiting in a long line that stretches up a hill. And at the top of that is the American dream. And the people waiting in line felt like they’d worked extremely hard, sacrificed a lot, tried their best, and were waiting for something they deserved. They’ve suffered long hours, layoffs, and exposure to dangerous chemicals at work and received reduced pensions.

But this line is increasingly not moving, or moving more slowly [i.e., as the economy stalls]. Then they see people cutting ahead of them in line. Immigrants, blacks, women, refugees, public sector workers. In their view, people are cutting ahead unfairly. And then in this narrative, there are Democrats to the side, line supervisors who seems to be waving these people ahead. So the government seemed to be on the side of the people who were cutting in line and pushing the people who are in line further back.

It is necessary to read the full description of this “Deep Story” that Hochschild presents in her book to appreciate the subtleties and textures of this narrative and the profound, wrenching sense of unfairness that it describes. In interviews and focus groups with working class people

this sense of being treated in a profoundly “unfair” way and the smoldering anger it produces is always one of the most powerful messages that emerge. The repeated charge is that *“We played by the rules, but the rules weren’t fair.”*

This perspective is the critical background for understanding white working-class opinion about migrants and migration.

“Good” and “Bad” Migration

On the one hand, there are the millions of mostly Mexican and Central American immigrants who gradually began to enter the U.S. during the 45-year period beginning in the 1980s where people found them to be generally *“good, hardworking”* employees – agricultural workers, gardeners, construction laborers, meatpacking and poultry plant workers, hotel maids, house cleaners, cooks and dishwashers. A significant number of Americans got to know some of these immigrants on a personal basis and the general view tended to be that they were polite, shy and mostly Catholic or evangelical. Local news reports highlighted stories about immigrant drug smugglers and violent criminals but the general view reflected in the polls until 2020 was that while the U.S.-Mexican border itself did need to be brought back firmly under control, the general presence of these long-term Latino immigrants did not itself constitute a massive and urgent national emergency. During his first term, in fact, Donald Trump’s fiercely bitter anti-immigrant campaign was entirely focused on reestablishing control of the border.

In sharp, indeed dramatic contrast, there is far less sympathy for the several million new immigrants who “jumped the line” of the traditional immigration system in just the four years of the Biden administration. In the past the image of illegal immigrants crossing the border at night and picked up by the border patrol was of bedraggled, exhausted individuals, families or small groups. In contrast, during the Biden administration there were daily reports and TV images of vast groups of thousands arriving at the border delivered by massive, organized transnational illegal human smuggling networks. These migrants calmly claimed political asylum by simply affirming that they feared persecution at home. Not only the conservative media but mainstream media as well explained that in this way they were receiving what was effectively a two-year permission to live and work in the US and in many cases being given food and shelter before having to actually provide even the slightest support for their claims. This complete evasion of the traditional immigration system seemed outrageous to many Democrats as well as to both MAGA and non-MAGA Republicans.

It is this background that explains why a wide range of survey data that shows that Americans are split roughly 50-50 between those who assert that all illegal immigrants should be deported and those who disagree also indicates that there are three major areas where support for deportation sinks to a minority.

A solid majority of the American people agree:

1. That “good people” –honest, hardworking people with families should not be deported.
2. That individuals detained by immigration authorities should still have the basic legal rights guaranteed to all by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

3. That individuals and families who have lived in the US for many years as law-abiding residents should not be deported.⁶

It is not surprising that a solid majority of Americans would agree with these three principles. The first two flow directly from the basic core of traditional cultural values that most Americans share and the belief in an America that is the “*land of the free*” and not a dictatorship. The last specifically targets the deep distinction working class people feel between long term residents and recent arrivals who “cut in line.”

And there are already proposals that propose different treatment for these groups and other migrants. One proposal is The Dignity Act introduced by Congresswoman María Elvira Salazar (FL-27) and Congress woman Veronica Escobar (TX-16) along with 20 other congressmen and women.

On the one hand the bill provides significant tightening of the Political Asylum system. It mandates that asylum cases be decided within 60 days rather than several years. During this period migrants would not be allowed to enter the country.

On the other hand, the bill provides a 7-year earned legal status program for undocumented immigrants who have been in the U.S. for more than five years, allowing them to earn the right to live and work legally, with a renewable status based on good conduct and restitution.

The bill imposes a number of significant restrictions on this status. Applicants must comply with all federal and state laws, **pass a criminal background check to exclude criminals**, repay back taxes owed and pay \$7,000 in restitution. They are also barred from access to federal means-tested benefits or entitlements.

The bill thus includes two of the three basic principles noted above. It is supported by a notable range of business and religious organizations including The US Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Evangelicals.

There are a range of other plans with similar features for these groups offered by organizations like Third Way, the Center for American Progress and others.

The “Abolish ICE” Argument

Some immigration advocates will argue that this kind of division between different categories of migrants is wrong – that absolutely all migrants deserve protection. Their view is embodied in the slogan that “*no human is illegal*”. Advocates see this as a basic moral issue on which compromise is impossible. For this reason they insist that only the demand to Abolish ICE is an adequate platform.

But there are two compelling arguments in favor of a strategy that does clearly distinguish law-abiding, long-term residents as a distinct group that deserves special consideration.

⁶https://prri.org/research/the-new-immigration-crackdown-where-americans-stand/?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email

<https://www.searchlightinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/ICE-Memo-Toplines-Searchlight-Immigration-Survey.pdf>

<https://www.foxnews.com/politics/fox-news-poll-59-voters-say-ice-too-aggressive-up-10-points-since-july>

<https://navigatorresearch.org/all-eyes-are-on-ice/>

1. This approach drives a profound wedge between the overt racists and the cultural traditionalists in the MAGA/GOP coalition.

In the explicitly racist view, every single non-white undocumented migrant is a “illegal criminal alien” who deserves absolutely no legal rights whatsoever and who should be summarily deported. Culturally traditional working-class people on the other hand disagree and will support laws and policies that make clear distinctions based on the three principles stated above.

Insisting on the demand to totally “abolish ICE” erases any of these distinctions and forces culturally traditional working class voters into the arms of the overt racists with an “all or nothing” choice between universal deportation of all undocumented migrants or a policy of “open borders” that appears to allow even criminals to remain in the country.

2. Enforcing a strategy that followed the three principles noted above would profoundly slow the Trump administration’s “Lightning Strike” (Blitzkrieg) strategy of overwhelming the opposition by rapid action.

The right-wing extremist cabal behind the mass deportation strategy was clearly aware that vast numbers of Americans would not approve of their plans. They therefore planned to unleash a “Lightning Strike” strategy of massive, rapid actions before the opposition could organize – quickly replacing long-serving ICE personnel with new, untrained ideologically right wing recruits who would indiscriminately grab any person of color, appointing new immigration judges who would ignore established immigration law and procedure based on the constitution and by funding a mass of cynical private contractors who would rapidly construct modern day concentration camps and transportation networks to deport the detained to other countries.

A strategy that insists that each detained individuals’ history and situation must be considered and allows the detained basic legal rights would grind this Blitzkrieg strategy to a halt. The grotesque plan to deport a million migrants a year absolutely depends on indiscriminate mass roundups and cattle like treatment of the captured. This basic strategy would become unworkable if forced to follow humane rules.

There are two practical demands for reforms that flow from this analysis:

1. The administration has dismissed or forced the resignation of several thousand veteran ICE agents and Immigration judges who insisted on upholding the traditional rules and laws regarding immigration. A simple demand is that these decent men and women be rehired.
2. ICE’s gargantuan 130 billion dollar budget was passed literally without congressional review or debate. Senate Democrats are now on record in support of a Bernie Sanders amendment to cut 75 billion dollars in previously appropriated ICE funds and reallocate the money to Medicaid. This would severely limit ICE in a way that could win far greater public support than any attempt to directly abolish the agency.

The two demands above provides a strategy for opposing the Trump administration’s plan that can win greater public support than “Abolish ICE” while still profoundly limiting ICE’s actions.