



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

THE REALITY MUST BE FACED: DEMOCRATS HAVE WON SOME BATTLES ON IMMIGRATION BUT ARE LOSING THE WAR.

BY
ANDREW LEVISON



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

THE REALITY MUST BE FACED: DEMOCRATS HAVE WON SOME BATTLES ON IMMIGRATION BUT ARE LOSING THE WAR.

ANDREW LEVISON

In the early weeks of 2026 massive popular outrage triggered by the clearly unjustified shooting of Renee Good and Alex Pretti forced the Trump administration to significantly slow its grotesque campaign of mass deportation. The violent, storm trooper like abductions of ordinary pedestrians and workers—frequently involving brutal assaults on women as well as men—were curtailed and the dramatic, repeated displays of masked and heavily armed men surging down city streets were substantially reduced. Together with a massive decrease in the flamboyantly violent rhetoric of many administration figures and the replacement of ICE leader Gregory Bovino with Tom Homan, it seemed to signal a significant change.

In other areas as well public pushback against the mass deportation campaign became increasingly evident.

The administration's plan to create a giant network of detention centers capable of holding 80,000 additional prisoners beyond those already in detention encountered growing opposition. Protests emerged in front of proposed centers in even deeply Republican rural areas, local governments formally objected to the massive demands the new facilities would place on municipal water, electricity and other services and—facing the opposition—some owners of the giant warehouses targeted for acquisition by the government refused to sell their properties.

In legal affairs as well, judges challenged the government's absolutely stunning stance that undocumented people could be held indefinitely and denied legal representation until they agreed to self-deport – upending a fundamental pillar of the American legal system that imprisonment without an appearance before a judge and the denial of any right to bail was a massive violation of the 8th amendment of the Bill of Rights which distinguished America from a dictatorship. As cases mounted judges across the country increasingly responded by ruling thousands of times that immigrants were being held illegally and ordering their release. Judges in Minnesota actually threatened government attorneys with being held in contempt and given prison time over the obvious pattern of blatantly ignored court orders and transparently false excuses.

Noting these changes, the press began to describe the administration as seeking to “rebrand,” “acknowledge ICE “mistakes,” “show more awareness of optics,” and “backpedaling.”

Andrew Levison is the author of *The White Working Class Today: Who They Are, How They Think and How Progressives Can Regain Their Support*. He is also a contributing editor of *The Democratic Strategist*.

But Winning these Battles is not the Same as Winning the War.

To begin with, the position of the leadership of ICE and Homeland Security is openly and shamelessly cynical – their clearly expressed goals are simply to get the brutality off the front pages, TV screens and web pages, to talk less about *“mass deportation”* and to stop killing white middle class protesters.

As Trump himself expressed the approach, *“Maybe we could use a little bit of a softer touch.”* The new Homeland Security Secretary Markwayne Mullin’s clearly stated his cynical objective, *“My goal in six months is that we’re not the lead story every day.”*

At the same time, however, the administration continued to firmly restate its basic perspective – that all undocumented immigrants and many documented ones as well are deeply undesirable and should be deported. Massive detention centers must continue to expand and the denial of legal rights must continue.

Self-Deportation

On one level the clearly expressed goal envisioned by Stephen Miller and the more strategic members of the administration is to make the conditions of life in the US so unpleasant that many immigrants beyond those in actual detention decide to “self-deport.” In their view this was always the most plausible way to actually achieve the goal of ridding the U.S. of literally millions of aliens.

It is this basic strategy that is behind Miller’s and other officials’ quite dramatic current drive to create a wide range of obstacles that would make life increasingly difficult for immigrants. In recent weeks Miller has emphasized demands that states deny migrant children the right to public education, to prevent undocumented immigrants from obtaining credit cards and bank accounts and to block them from public housing and medical care. Along with this the strategy envisions extending the obstacles to a larger range of immigrants – green card holders, naturalized citizens and the U.S. born children of undocumented parents.

Facing the Long Term Problem

But the pressure to self-deport does not address a fundamental long term problem – that American business wants a substantial supply of relatively low wage workers who are willing to accept wages and working conditions that US workers will not. Under pressure from what Trump called *“our wonderful farmers”* i.e., the powerful agricultural lobby, Trump firmly directed ICE to not conduct roundups in agricultural areas where laborers’ absence would powerfully drive up food prices. But similar pressures for exemptions from ICE raids exist across a wide range of other occupations including meat packing, construction, restaurant work (dishwashers, cooks and busboys), maids, housekeepers, child care and elder care workers, lawn workers and others.

As a *Washington Post* editorial noted: Evidence of worker shortages is everywhere: from cattle operations in Kansas to the crawfish industry in Louisiana. Restaurants and hotels report more than 900,000 vacant jobs. More than half of dine-in restaurants surveyed by the National

Restaurant Association report fewer applicants for “kitchen-support positions” in 2025. A record number of D.C. restaurants closed last year, thanks to higher operating costs and fewer available workers.¹

It was employers’ desire for low wage labor that first encouraged the migration of Mexican and Central American workers that began in the 1980s. As unions unsuccessfully insisted at the time, this migration could have been massively reduced by strict rules and sanctions placed on employers who hired “illegals.”

Stephen Miller’s recent actions are therefore inherently aimed not only at encouraging self-deportation but simultaneously at creating a marginalized underclass driven to the fringes of society but still available to fill low-wage jobs.

The obvious model for this kind of system was the treatment of African Americans in the segregationist South. They were confined to all-black neighborhoods with separate black doctors, hospitals, restaurants, schools and other local businesses. While allowed to commute to jobs in white areas, Black workers were forced to return to their segregated neighborhoods when work was done. They were at the mercy of all-white police departments that routinely brutalized and imprisoned any African-American who displayed any sign of opposition.

This was the brutal reality for African Americans that MAGA advocates now rhapsodize as the wonderful “*traditional America*” to which they wish the country would return.

How the GOP Holds its Advantage While the Democrats Flounder

The key to the GOP advantage is their powerful message discipline which is rigidly consistent from the news and commentators on *Fox News* to the words of every spokesman on social media.

They offer two main ideas:

1. They rigidly insist on calling all undocumented immigrants “*criminals*.” They justify this with the circular argument that “*every individual committed a crime when they came into this country illegally*.” Undocumented migrants are all therefore, by definition, criminals. This, then, becomes the justification for their imprisonment and deportation.
2. On a more concrete level, the administration argues that “*70% of the undocumented are “criminal illegal aliens*.” But in fact, only a literal handful are what they define as “*the Worst of the Worst*” – gang members, pedophiles, murderers, rapists and so on.

Their argument is entirely debunked by the administration’s own data. As a recent CBS news analysis reported:

Less than 14% of nearly 400,000 immigrants arrested by Immigration and Customs Enforcement in President Trump’s first year back in the White House had charges or convictions for violent criminal offenses, according to an internal Department of Homeland Security document obtained by CBS News.

¹<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2026/04/14/immigration-crackdown-causes-massive-shortages-unskilled-labor/>

The internal DHS figures undermine frequent assertions by the Trump administration that its crackdown on illegal immigration is primarily targeting dangerous and violent criminals living in the U.S. illegally, people Mr. Trump and his lieutenants have regularly called the “*worst of the worst*.”

For example, while Mr. Trump and his aides often talk about immigration officials targeting murderers, rapists and gangsters, the internal data indicate that less than 2% of those arrested by ICE over the past year had homicide or sexual assault charges or convictions. Another 2% of those taken into ICE custody were accused of being gang members.

Added together, the number of ICE arrests involving individuals charged with or convicted of any of the aforementioned violent crimes represents around 13.9% of all arrests.²

Yet, the “*worst of the worst*” story line is mechanically repeated day after day filling the information pipeline for millions of Americans.

In Striking Contrast, the Dems Have Absolutely No Common Narrative or Plan

In striking contrast to the GOP’s fierce message discipline, the Democrats have essentially no common coherent program nor message at all. While they firmly express dislike for mass deportation in general, they offer no clear vision about what they propose to do instead.

For example:

1. In the current shutdown in Congress the press reports that the Democratic leadership is proposing over a dozen different demands with no clearly expressed set of priorities among them. Not one Democratic voter in 100 could say what changes it is that Dems are actually demanding to end the shutdown.
2. Different Democratic candidates offer entirely distinct messages and demands beyond expressing general hostility to ICE and opposition to its activities. But in the absence of any specific alternatives, the hazy slogan “abolish ICE” seems only to imply essentially legalizing all migrants and allowing entirely open borders. There is no clearly formulated Democratic plan for controlling the border and regulating future migration.

The harsh reality is this: in the absence of any coherent Democratic message the GOP is basically free to continue its quest for mass deportation, albeit more slowly than before.

What Democrats Need: A Strategy Based on the Realities of Public Opinion

Understanding current public opinion on immigration presents unique difficulties. On many questions opinion has shifted dramatically since last December making polls conducted at different times during this period misleading to meaningfully compare. Differences in the way different questions are worded and between those asking simple yes/no questions and those offering options like “strongly agree” and “somewhat agree” also make direct comparisons difficult. As a result, presenting specific percentages on various issues can create a misleading sense of precision. But across a range of surveys the following basic generalizations hold true:

²<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ice-arrests-violent-criminal-records-trump-first-year/>

1. A very strong majority of Americans clearly express the opinion that actual “criminals” should indeed be deported, support generally ranges in the 70s and 80s percentile.
2. Equally strong majorities support “regaining control of the border” and credit Trump with having achieved this.

However, a solid majority of the American people also agree with the following:

3. That “good people” – honest, hardworking people with families, particularly those who have lived in the U.S. for many years, should not be deported.
4. That individuals detained by immigration authorities should still have the basic legal rights guaranteed to all by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

It is not surprising that a solid majority of Americans would agree with these latter principles. They 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.

There is no reason why a coherent Democratic policy on immigration should not incorporate all four of these basic principles. The majority of Democratic voters do not seriously support the right of undocumented aliens who are actually serious criminals to be granted permanent residence in the U.S. nor for there to be literally “open borders.”

And in fact, there are already entirely serious legislative proposals that essentially do incorporate the four principles above. One significant initiative is the Dignity Act, introduced by Congresswoman María Elvira Salazar (FL-27) and Congresswoman Veronica Escobar (TX-16) joined by a group of 20 Democratic and Republican Congressmen and women.

The key elements of the bill are provisions that would combine substantially increased border enforcement with a compromise status for undocumented immigrants who have been in the country for more than 5 years.

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. Under its provisions asylum-seekers will undergo an initial interview within 15 days of their arrival and further screening by trained asylum officers for final determination within an additional 45 days. During this period they will not be allowed to enter the country. In effect this would shut down the major source of migrants who simply bypass the traditional immigration system.

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. The bill imposes a number of very significant restrictions on this status. Applicants must comply with all federal and state laws, pass a criminal background check, repay back taxes owed, start paying income taxes, pay an additional \$7,000 in restitution over seven years, check in with DHS every two years and remain in good public standing. They are also barred from access to federal means-tested benefits or entitlements.

The bill is supported by a notable range of business and religious organizations including The U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Evangelicals. The Chamber of Commerce's endorsement stated:

"The U.S. Chamber of Commerce supports the Dignity Act as a constructive step towards providing the necessary resources to strengthen border security that builds on President Trump's success at the southern border. This bipartisan bill offers sensible solutions for the legal immigration system, addresses critical workforce needs for businesses, and advances American innovation and productivity. The U.S. Chamber appreciates the efforts of Representatives Salazar and Escobar and looks forward to continued collaboration with all members of Congress who are committed to addressing the security and workforce needs of our country.

The threat that this compromise approach poses to the unity of the GOP coalition is underscored by the fierce reaction of the MAGA wing of the GOP. The *National Review*, for example, condemned the bill in the strongest terms as follows:

Passing this bill would be the first official step toward creating a permanent resident underclass that falls short of citizenship... The American republic does not want and is not fit for a racialized [underclass] with a perpetually renewable legal status. ...Congress should read the signs of the time and reject this bill as yet another attempt to sneak mass amnesty by an American people who have been demanding law and order for decades.³

To be sure, conservatives and the Trump administration would most certainly prefer that Democrats continue to simply criticize the cruelty of the current immigration policy without offering any coherent alternative that would be capable of winning the support of a majority of the American people.

There is, however, no reason why Democrats should continue to accommodate them.

³<https://www.nationalreview.com/2025/07/a-pathway-to-amnesty/>