



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

OPPONENTS OF DEPORTATION NEED POLITICAL STRATEGY, NOT JUST OUTRAGE.

BY
ANDREW LEVISON



Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times



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The dramatic cruelty of Trump's immigration roundups together with his totally undisguised, visceral loathing of non-whites and plan for expelling quite literally *millions* of immigrants makes it clear to sensible Americans that the Republican rhetoric about deporting "*the worst of the worst*" *immigrant criminals* is simply a smokescreen for a policy of explicit racial/ethnic cleansing.

As a result, it seems easy to simply dismiss the constant mechanical repetition of the phrases "*illegal alien criminals—murderers, rapists, gang members, pedophiles, kidnappers, child smugglers, sex traffickers, terrorists and violent thugs*"—as vacuous propaganda.

Because of this many progressives and Democrats—as well as many other non-MAGA Americans including substantial numbers of devout Catholics and Protestants—respond with a total repudiation of the entire Republican approach. They condemn the mass deportations as cruel, inhumane and against basic American values and to be sure these criticisms are entirely valid. For any reasonable person the grotesque character of the mass deportation plan would seem to be clear.

But it is important to realize that the administration's constant, seemingly vacuous invocation of "*the worst of the worst*" actually reflects a very specific and clearly focused political strategy. Democrats and Progressives need to carefully examine this strategy in order to understand its specific purpose and—most important—to recognize where its weaknesses lie and how best to exploit them.

The essential problem is that relying entirely on a complete and categorical rejection of the administration's plan will tend to consolidate rather than divide its supporters.

The basic fact is that, in general, American attitudes span a wide spectrum from a very small minority of Americans who support completely open borders to a larger but still distinctly less than majority group who support the deportation of virtually all non-white migrants with most Americans falling somewhere in the middle, supporting a range of different distinctions and variations regarding who to deport, on what basis and with what protections for basic legal rights.

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Here are recent poll results that indicate the overall trend:

	All voters	Democrats	Republicans
Percent who support deporting immigrants living in the United States illegally back to their home countries	54	19	92
Percent who oppose deporting immigrants living in the United States illegally back to their home countries	43	76	6
Percent who say that the administration is deporting people who should be deported	51	14	92
Percent who say that the administration is deporting People who mostly should NOT be deported	42	80	4

Public support for mass deportation thus depends on an extremely narrow knife-edge majority of 51% to 54%. Even a very slight decline in support would tip the balance.

In addition, majorities of 51%, 53% and 57% also now actually believe that the administration's actions "have gone too far," are "not fair" and "are going in the wrong direction".¹

¹<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/10/02/polls/times-siena-poll-registered-voter-crosstabs.html>

	All Voters	Democrats	Republicans
The administration has gone too far	51	90	7
The administration has not gone far enough	12	2	22
About right	35	6	69
The policy has been fair	44	6	88
The policy has not been fair	53	91	10
The way the federal government is dealing with undocumented immigrants is going in the wrong direction	57	89	18
The increase in funding for (ICE) to speed up efforts to arrest, detain, and deport undocumented immigrants has gone too far	52	85	19
Percent who say they have “a great deal” or “some” confidence in ICE	42	16	79

The basic structure of American opinion on this issue is therefore a mix of borderline majority support for deportation combined with very significant reservations.²

It is impossible to understand this ambivalent mixture of views on immigration without understanding how they evolved:

1. Most Americans traditionally supported the official immigration system which required immigrants to follow a rigid legal pathway to citizenship or permanent residency in the U.S. This is still the way most Americans want the system to work.
2. In previous decades there was a certain degree of sympathy for the exhausted, bedraggled individuals and families who made the difficult and dangerous trek across the border, but this was nonetheless combined with a growing demand that the border had to be brought back under control.
3. Beginning in 2020 there was wide and very intense public outrage against the Biden Administration policies that suddenly gave several million migrants what amounted to a completely “free pass” to enter the country without even the most minimal scrutiny.
4. As a result, Trump’s dramatic steps to firmly close the border in early 2025 were overwhelmingly popular but, as shown above, the administration’s current deportation policies are now seen as “going too far.”

²https://prri.org/research/the-new-immigration-crackdown-where-americans-stand/?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email

In fact, the public opinion data clearly shows that most Americans have nuanced views about immigration with only a minority holding to the extreme positions of either demanding the deportation of literally all undocumented immigrants or of allowing entirely open borders.

This division is apparent even within the GOP. Only 37% of the GOP coalition believes that virtually “all migrants should be deported – by whatever means are necessary” and only 3% say that *no migrants should be deported at all*. The majority hold positions somewhere in between the two extremes.³

Current GOP

Regarding illegal immigration, which of the following comes closest to your view?

After years of open borders, there are so many illegal immigrants that our top priority should be deporting as many as possible, by whatever means are necessary	37%
We need to significantly reduce the number of illegal immigrants, but this must be done carefully, with due process, so innocent people aren't wrongly detained or deported	34%
Not Sure	4%
Many illegal immigrants have lived peacefully since their initial violation. We should focus on deporting serious criminals, not families or otherwise law-abiding residents	22%
We shouldn't be focused on deporting illegal immigrants at all	3%

This deep division with most Republicans agreeing with neither “pure” position suggests that this is the strategic gap along which the GOP coalition can be split.

There is, however, one conservative view that does indeed win the support of a solid majority of all Americans – the view that all serious criminals—especially violent criminals—should be deported.⁴

A March 2025 Pew survey, for example, found that only 32% of Americans believed that all immigrants living illegally in the US should be deported and only 16% believed that none should be deported.

³<https://manhattan.institute/article/the-new-gop-survey-analysis-of-americans-overall-todays-republican-coalition-and-the-minorities-of-maga>

⁴https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2025/03/RE_2025.03.26_Views-of-Deportations_FINAL.pdf

It is worth noting that this is an emotional reaction more than a logical one. To protect society and punish major drug traffickers, murderers and other felons people like these should logically be in put in jail for long sentences, not given free flights to their home countries from where they can still very easily sneak back into the US once again. The conservative rhetoric makes it sound as if deportation is a permanent banishment but for any major criminal with money and contacts it is closer to a minor inconvenience.

But of the 51% majority who favored a more balanced view **97% nonetheless agreed with deporting migrants who committed violent crimes** (an opinion that declined to 52% for non-violent crimes).⁵

As a result, the underlying Republican strategy to hold their tenuous coalition together is therefore to try to reduce the discussion of this complex set of attitudes to a simple choice between “supporting violent criminals” or “opposing violent criminals.”

There are two major methods they employ to achieve this:

1. By constantly broadcasting vivid stories of “evil” immigrants that are promoted in Fox News and conservative media. In these media outlets there is a constant daily flow of reports of murders, rapes, etc. committed by migrants, creating the impression of a massive migrant crime wave.
2. Through dramatic depictions of heroic immigration cops battling the villains. The conservative media portrays ICE and Border Patrol officers as swaggering, iron jawed “Dirty Harry” tough guys who cast aside the bureaucratic restrictions to track down the “bad guys.”

This is continually promoted by the massive circulation of shameless propaganda videos. As a *Washington Post* article noted:

The Administration’s strategy is to flood social and traditional media with imagery of ICE arrests...Public affairs officers were told to rewrite their news releases and online posts with stronger, more aggressive language if they wanted the agency’s main communications channels to promote them. “If the truth of the operation does not match the narrative of the ‘worst of the worst,’ it’s going to be killed,” one official said.⁶

In the conservative media this is the consistent visual frame—“good guys” vs “bad guys”—with any images of weeping women and crying children strictly omitted.

The administration sees it as urgent to keep all discussion firmly on this basis, particularly within the GOP coalition. It is for this reason that administration spokesmen make no attempt to sincerely engage with critics or answer doubts. Instead, they respond with a rigidly scripted, robotic repetition of the Trump administration party line that makes them sound eerily reminiscent of Soviet propaganda spokesmen in the 1950s.

Their basic objective is to completely fill the conservative information space with propaganda in order to reassure the GOP base and prevent serious discussion of any alternative approaches.

The specific technique that is employed is to absolutely insist that the vast majority of all “illegal” aliens are indeed violent criminals. The incessant, mindlessly repeated slogan is that ICE is only arresting “*the worst of the worst.*”

⁵<https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2025/03/26/americans-views-of-deportations/>

⁶https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/interactive/2025/ice-social-media-blitz/?itid=hp-top-table-main_p001_f007

The reality, however, is that the majority of undocumented immigrants who are detained either have no criminal record at all or have committed only relatively minor offenses like traffic violations, disorderly conduct, disturbing the peace, drug and alcohol use or similar infractions.⁷

This does not stop the administration from making grandiose claims. A new Homeland Security database, for example, offers a lurid description of immigrant criminality.

“This new Worst of the Worst web page allows every American to see for themselves the criminal illegal aliens that we are arresting, what crimes they committed, and what communities we removed them from. This is all about transparency and showing results,” said Assistant Secretary Tricia McLaughlin. *“As the media whitewashes the facts, day in and day out, our brave men and women of ICE risk their lives for the American people. Americans don’t have to rely on the press for this information – with this transparent tool, they can see for themselves what public safety threats were lurking in their neighborhoods and communities.”*⁸

A CATO Institute memo, however, demonstrates that the list is entirely nonsense. As it notes:

This week, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) published data intended to prove that DHS immigration arrests are *“starting with the worst of the worst.”* DHS incoherently calls the list the *“dictionary of depravity.”* But its own data show the opposite: DHS is not prioritizing the *“worst of the worst.”* It is running up its arrest numbers and then using a relatively small number of serious criminals to smear everyone else.

- The DHS *“worst of the worst”* data account for just 4 percent of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) arrests since January 20.
- Even among the individuals that DHS claims are the *“worst of the worst,”* 56 percent have not been charged with any violent crimes.
- A quarter of the *“worst of the worst”* offenders had nothing more than a vice, traffic infraction (not including driving under the influence), or immigration charge.
- DHS has placed thousands of people’s faces and names on this list of infamy only for minor offenses, including drug possession charges, traffic infractions, and minor immigration offenses.
- DHS also counts the same individuals multiple times in dozens of cases.⁹

⁷This is obscured by categorizing the detained using the misleading categories *“convicted,” “awaiting sentence”* and *“non-convicted”* which obscures the key question of the distinction between minor and trivial offences (such as driving without a license, public intoxication etc.), more serious offences but less than major crimes (such as barroom brawling or shoplifting) and the worst major felonies.

<https://www.cato.org/blog/dhs-classifies-just-4-ice-arrests-worst-most-nonviolent-offenses-0>

⁸<https://www.dhs.gov/wow>

⁹<https://www.cato.org/blog/dhs-classifies-just-4-ice-arrests-worst-most-nonviolent-offenses-0>

The Fundamental Question that Opponents of the Administration's Strategy Must Now Decide is How to Most Effectively Challenge It.

Even though the Trump administration had clearly announced its vast plans for a massive deportation program during the 2024 campaign, the extraordinary speed with which it launched the campaign and the breathtaking scale of the attack still took Democrats and other opponents by surprise. The absolutely fierce and lawless character of the street roundups made conventional rallies and meetings entirely inadequate as a response.

The more effective form of resistance that did develop after the massive round-ups in Los Angeles, was the rise of Rapid Response Networks in NY, D.C., Chicago and other cities which coordinated the resistance through telephone warning networks, the wide distribution of whistles that street observers could use to warn migrants of approaching ICE convoys and a dedicated cadre of people willing to physically block cars and soldiers with their bodies. Although this was inadequate to totally stop the roundups, these measures did significantly impede them, measurably preventing them from achieving their numerical objectives.

This required a great and admirable degree of personal dedication and courage, but it faced two significant limitations.

1. It was easy for the administration to slander the actions as violent and criminal. There was no way for TV and video viewers to see and understand what was actually going on behind the clouds of tear gas and people running in different directions.
2. It was not a form of protest that could engage the participation of large masses of people—as the **appalling and profoundly evil ICE shooting of a woman monitoring the ICE patrols in Minnesota dramatically demonstrated**—it was simply too dangerous and difficult. The peaceful mass demonstrations in the “No Kings” days protests were massive but could not put effective pressure on an administration that was so bitterly extremist in character that it had literally no concern for peaceful expressions of public opinion.

As a result, the rapid response actions had a minimal effect on weakening the basic GOP strategy of reducing the debate to a choice between extremes and retaining the support of the conservative wing.

To expand the opposition coalition the appropriate counter strategy is therefore to seek the ways to divide the Republican coalition – and the basic reality is that to do this it is necessary to appeal to many Americans who support a range of compromise positions:

Consider the following statistics:

1. 60% of the American people say immigrants living in the United States illegally should be given *a way to become citizens*, provided they meet certain requirements.
2. 60% of the American people say immigrants brought illegally to the U.S. as children should be able to gain legal resident status.
3. 63% oppose arresting and detaining undocumented immigrants who have resided in the United States with no criminal record.¹⁰

¹⁰https://prri.org/research/the-new-immigration-crackdown-where-americans-stand/?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email

This suggests that a very significant section of the GOP coalition can be won over if they are offered policies and protests that accurately reflect their views.

Here Are Four Strategies for Pursuing this Goal

1. Promote Legislation that Promotes Compromise Objectives

For example, in 2025 Congresswoman María Elvira Salazar (FL-27) and Congresswoman Veronica Escobar (TX-16) joined by a group of 20 Democratic and Republican congressmen and women introduced The Dignity Act.

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 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 Chamber of Commerce and the National Coalition of Evangelicals.

It is notable that this compromise quite accurately reflects the views of the middle group of Americans who want a balanced solution. As such it would deeply divide the GOP coalition.

2. Promote Local Protests and Organizing in Deep Red GOP Districts that Directly Challenge the “all immigrants are criminals” Narrative.

While Republicans in deep red districts are constantly lied to by conservative media they increasingly find the narrative contradicted by their own personal experience. Many people in small towns and red districts have come to personally know individual migrants – the well-liked owner of local restaurant, the gardener, cook or baby sitter they or their neighbors employ or the nurse or a caretaker at a senior care facility and know that they are not “worst of worst.”

As ICE moves more and more directly into their neighborhoods—as it increasingly will—they will brutally deport these people radicalizing those who know them and who want to protect their friends and neighbors.

These protesters can amplify their concern by joining together to create and circulate lists of these people as the “Best of the Best” – and presenting it at local candidate meetings, city council meetings and political events as a direct antidote to the daily propaganda on TV and social media. Such lists would provide a vivid alternative to the administration propaganda and attract significant media attention.

3. Focus Community Attention on the Damaging and Corrupting Local Side Effects of the Vast Sums of Money Being Poured into Deportation.

- There is a widespread concern that the funding would misuse resources and unjustly enrich the legions of for-profit private contractors by allowing them to create unnecessary detention centers, private airplane fleets and other facilities. The opportunities for corruption with the vast, totally unmonitored 170 billion dollar budget for deportation operations authorized by Congress in 2025 are quite literally unimaginable.
- There is widespread concern that the deportation operations will divert resources from legitimate law enforcement activities. It is already becoming clear that agents from the FBI, DEA, Homeland Security and even the IRS are being pulled off counterterrorism, narcotics, and child-exploitation cases to bolster deportation operations.¹¹ Police departments that are already struggling to recruit new officers now compete with ICE which offers higher salaries and easier entrance requirements. Local police are being diverted from crime prevention to immigration enforcement. Federal prisons are losing corrections officers to ICE. The overall result will be a serious decline in legitimate law enforcement activities.

One dramatic example of a successful protest against a clear misuse of local resources was the case of a coast guard helicopter that was vital for rescuing fishing boats during storms in Newport, Oregon that was requisitioned and relocated by ICE for deportation duties. Hundreds of citizens flooded town meetings to protest and demand its return, generating a broad-based coalition that forced ICE to reverse its decision.¹²

Similar community protests have occurred in towns where local police have been reassigned to immigration enforcement duties. As ICE operations trickle down to more and more local communities, opposition will inevitably increase.

4. Seek to Win Public Support Among Law Enforcement Professionals Being Purged by the Administration.

Fact: the Administration is replacing nearly one-half the top leadership in ICE offices across the country with Border Patrol officers. As long-term immigration observer Nick Miroff notes:

For much of ICE’s 22-year history, the agency aimed to operate with relative discretion: Officers handled administrative tasks and carried out deportations in what they thought of as targeted campaigns. Now, amid the White House’s crackdown on illegal immigration, the Department of Homeland Security is resorting to more indiscriminate methods...

¹¹<https://www.thirdway.org/memo/americans-caught-between-trumps-cruelty-and-democrats-chaos>

¹²<https://oregoncapitalchronicle.com/2025/12/02/people-will-boycott-how-a-coastal-city-fight-against-ice-is-making-waves-across-oregon/>

ICE doesn't like being blamed for Border Patrol operations that they see as needlessly confrontational and provocative and confrontational. A lot of veteran ICE officers are both burnt out and pretty demoralized by what they have seen over the course of the last 8 months.¹³

At the same time the Trump administration is also slashing the ranks of long serving immigration judges in a drive to extend its broader crackdown to the administrative courts where they serve and thereby speed up deportations. As Blumberg News notes:

...last month the administration began a hiring blitz for "deportation judge" positions, offering the chance to "make decisions with generational consequences." The Homeland Security Department has leaned into a recruiting pitch that calls for candidates to "bring down the hammer on criminal illegal aliens" and "defend your communities, your culture, your very way of life."¹⁴

The situation now promises to become far worse with the roll-out of a new 100 million dollar recruitment campaign for new ICE agents. As the *New York Times* notes:

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials are planning to spend \$100 million over a one-year period to recruit **gun rights supporters and military enthusiasts** through online influencers and a geo-targeted advertising campaign, part of what the agency called a "wartime recruitment" strategy that calls for recruits willing to perform their "sacred duty" and "defend the homeland" by repelling "foreign invaders."

ICE recruitment ads, the plan said, would be shown to people with an interest in "military and veterans' affairs," "physical training" or "conservative news and politics" and would target people whose lifestyles are "patriotic" or "conservative-leaning."

The strategy is designed to target listeners of conservative radio shows, country music and podcasts related to patriotism, men's interests and true crime, as well as any accounts that resemble users with an interest in "conservative thought leaders, gun rights organizations [and] tactical weapons gear brands," the document said.¹⁵

The simple fact is that with this kind of expansion ICE will no longer simply be an immigration police. It will be a heavily armed, explicitly right-wing paramilitary force that will be ideologically extreme and willing to oppress any group or institution that opposes the Trump regime. People with this background will have no doubts or hesitations about shutting down Democratic Party offices, polling places, universities, religious centers or liberal and centrist organizations or arresting students, teachers, clergymen, elected officials and any other individuals or groups the administration defines as enemies.

Right now a major problem is that many of the professionals who are appalled by what is happening will not take a public stand because it is clear that the administration will respond with vicious retaliation – they know that they will clearly risk their jobs and reputations.

¹³<https://www.theatlantic.com/newsletters/2025/11/how-immigration-enforcement-works-ice-dhs/685068/>

¹⁴Judges are getting fired as Trump pursues immigration "purge"

¹⁵ICE plans \$100 million recruitment push targeting gun shows, military fans - *The Washington Post*

But as this essentially right-wing vigilante force grows it may become the catalyst for many of the fired professionals to take a public stand. Many are deep believers in the American system of law and justice and will reach a point where they are no longer willing to remain silent.

The administration can retaliate against a limited number of dissidents but if several thousand band together to publicly protest they can measurably affect public opinion.

Conclusion

1. It is important to realize that the administration's constant, seemingly vacuous invocation of "the worst of the worst" actually reflects a very specific and clearly focused political strategy. Democrats and Progressives need to carefully examine this strategy in order to understand its specific purpose and to recognize where its weaknesses lie and how best to exploit them.
2. The public opinion data clearly shows that most Americans have nuanced views about immigration with only a minority holding to the extreme positions of either demanding the deportation of literally all undocumented immigrants or of allowing entirely open borders. Most Americans support a range of different distinctions and variations regarding who to deport, on what basis and with what protections for basic legal rights. **This division is apparent even within the GOP.**
3. There is, however, one conservative view that does indeed win the support of a solid majority of all Americans – the view that all serious criminals—especially violent criminals—should be deported.
4. As a result, the underlying Republican strategy for holding their tenuous coalition together is to try to reduce the discussion of this complex set of attitudes to a simple choice between *supporting violent criminals* or *opposing violent criminals*.
5. The appropriate counter strategy is therefore to challenge this simplistic view and offer alternatives.

Here Are Four Specific Tactics for Pursuing this Goal

1. Promote Legislation that Promotes Compromise Objectives
2. Promote Local Protests and Organizing in Deep Red GOP Districts that Directly Challenge the *all immigrants are criminals* Narrative.
3. Focus Community Attention on the Damaging and Corrupting Local Side Effects of the Vast Sums of Money Being Poured into Deportation.
4. Seek to Win Public Support among Law Enforcement Professionals being Purged by the Administration.