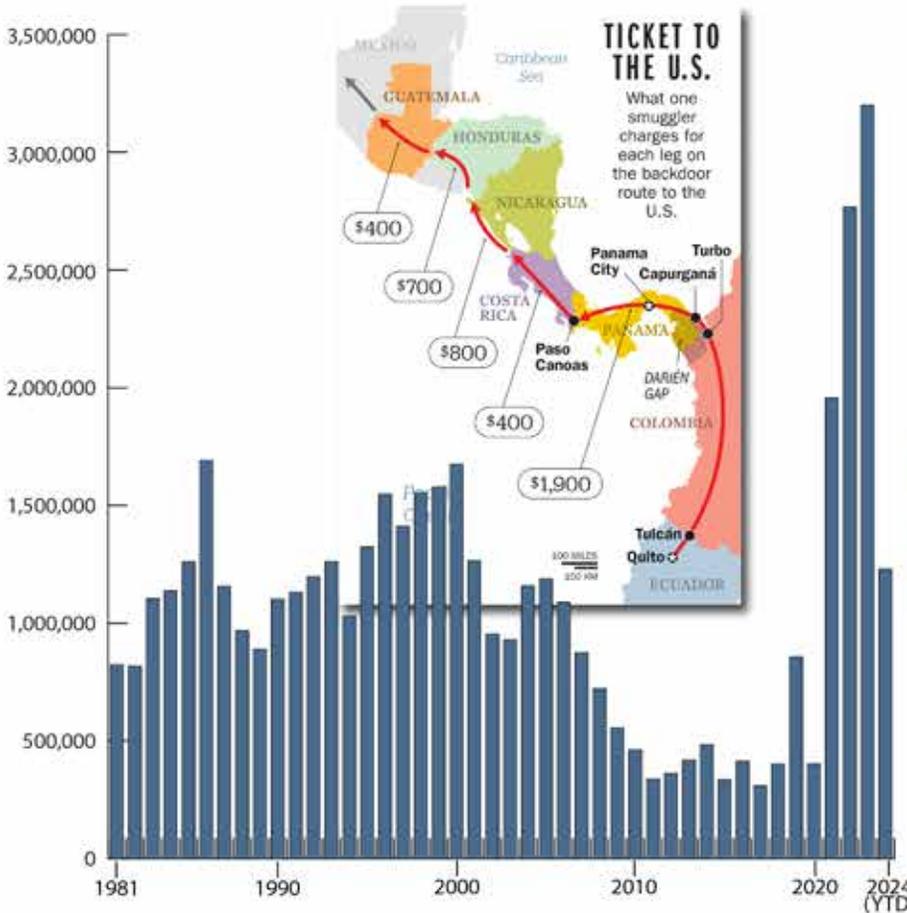




## TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

### DEMOCRATS IGNORE THE CENTRAL FACT ABOUT MODERN IMMIGRATION – AND IT’S LED THEM TO POLITICAL DISASTER.

BY  
ANDREW LEVISON



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Here is a political “thought experiment” that all serious Democrats should consider.

Imagine attending a major month-long conference convened to draft a Democratic party platform about cocaine and fentanyl addiction that after weeks of deliberation produces a draft that does not contain **even a single sentence** dealing with the role of the major Mexican and Columbian Drug cartels or the major American Pharmaceutical companies in creating the drug problem.

Instead, the entire proposed platform is focused on convincing people to feel sympathy for the difficult problems that individual addicts face and to refuting the unfair characterizations of addicts as all being degenerates and criminals.

Most intelligent Democrats would not disagree with either of these two goals but would be utterly stunned by the fact that the strategists were so utterly myopic as to think that a strategy that needed to win the support of the majority of the American people could completely ignore a fundamental reality of the drug problem – one that many voters clearly consider absolutely central to any solution.

***Yet, this is precisely the situation that Democrats now face today regarding immigration.***

If one reads the New York Times or major progressive magazines like The New Republic virtually all of the commentaries written by progressives and Democrats focus on two basic themes:

1. The need for Americans to feel sympathy for migrants based on the vivid descriptions of unfortunate men women and children straggling across the border fleeing “gangs, violence, kidnapping, poverty and destitution.”
2. The economic benefits that migrants offer America which genuinely needs unskilled workers.

Here are typical headlines from recent progressive commentaries in the op-ed section of The New York Times.

“Biden Can’t Stop Immigration – It’s Time to Embrace It.”

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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*.

“Sacrificing Migrant Rights for Ukraine Aid Would Be Terrible Policy.”

“The Border Deal Is a Political Trap for Democrats.”

“Don’t Listen to Eric Adams: Immigrants Make New York City”

And here are the headlines of recent commentaries in The New Republic:

“What the Media Gets Wrong About the So-Called Border Crisis”

“Trump Endorsed Policies at the Border Will Make the President’s Reelection Bid Even Harder.”

“It’s Probably Good That the Border Deal Fell Through.”

“An Immigration Journalist Makes the Case For Open Borders.”

“Behind the Political Theater Over the Now Dead Border Bill There Is Still a Humanitarian Crisis That’s Been Left To Fester.”

The pattern is similar across the entire progressive and pro-Democratic media, reinforced by vast numbers of journalistic reports that describe the hardships and travails of individual families.

Remarkably, in all of these commentaries there is *rarely even a single sentence* that discusses the role of the massive multi-billion dollar international human smuggling rings in producing the current wave of migrants.<sup>1</sup>

Yet in news articles in the New York Times and other reputable news sources, the massive role of the human smuggling organizations in modern migration is extensively reported:

Here are just a few typical headlines:

“Smuggling Migrants Now a Billion Dollar International Business Controlled by Organized Crime Including Some of Mexico’s Most Violent Drug Cartels.” (NYT)

“A Ticket to Disney? Politicians Charge Millions to Send Migrants to U.S.” (NYT)

“As Border Crossings Spike, Smugglers and Organized Crime Are Driving the Shift” (Times Union)

“Human Smuggling Has Morphed Into One of the Most Lucrative Industries For Crime Groups.” (Insight Crime)

“A voyage through the fraught, life-changing and totally routine human smuggling business.” The United Nations international organization for migration says smugglers collect 35 billion a year to facilitate the journey” (TIME)

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<sup>1</sup>Human smuggling is a distinct term from “Human Trafficking”. The latter term refers to people who are transported against their will or under duress.

"The big reason migrants are coming in droves: they believe they can stay. ...by and large they are not wrong" ( NYT)

These reports specifically point out the vital role of social media and the internet.

"Tick Tok, Facebook and YouTube are transforming global migration, becoming tools of migrants and smugglers alike" (NYT)

"Cartel backed recruiters are using Snapchat, TikTok and other apps to lure drivers to transport migrants. (Business Week)

The reason that progressive and Democratic commentaries prefer to ignore this major reality is not hard to understand. Discussing the role of the massive human smuggling networks deeply complicates the particular narrative that pro-immigration groups and organizations have chosen to promote. They long ago decided that focusing all attention on the humanitarian and personal hardship aspects of the story was the best way to win popular support for allowing greater migration. In contrast, portraying migrants as cynically manipulated in a massive illegal system would diminish public sympathy.

*But as public opinion has profoundly shifted against the Democrats on immigration it is now vital to confront the reality of the human smuggling organizations. Democrats cannot regain public support by ignoring this issue, while confronting it can offer Dems a more effective narrative and political strategy.*

## **The Reality of Modern Migration**

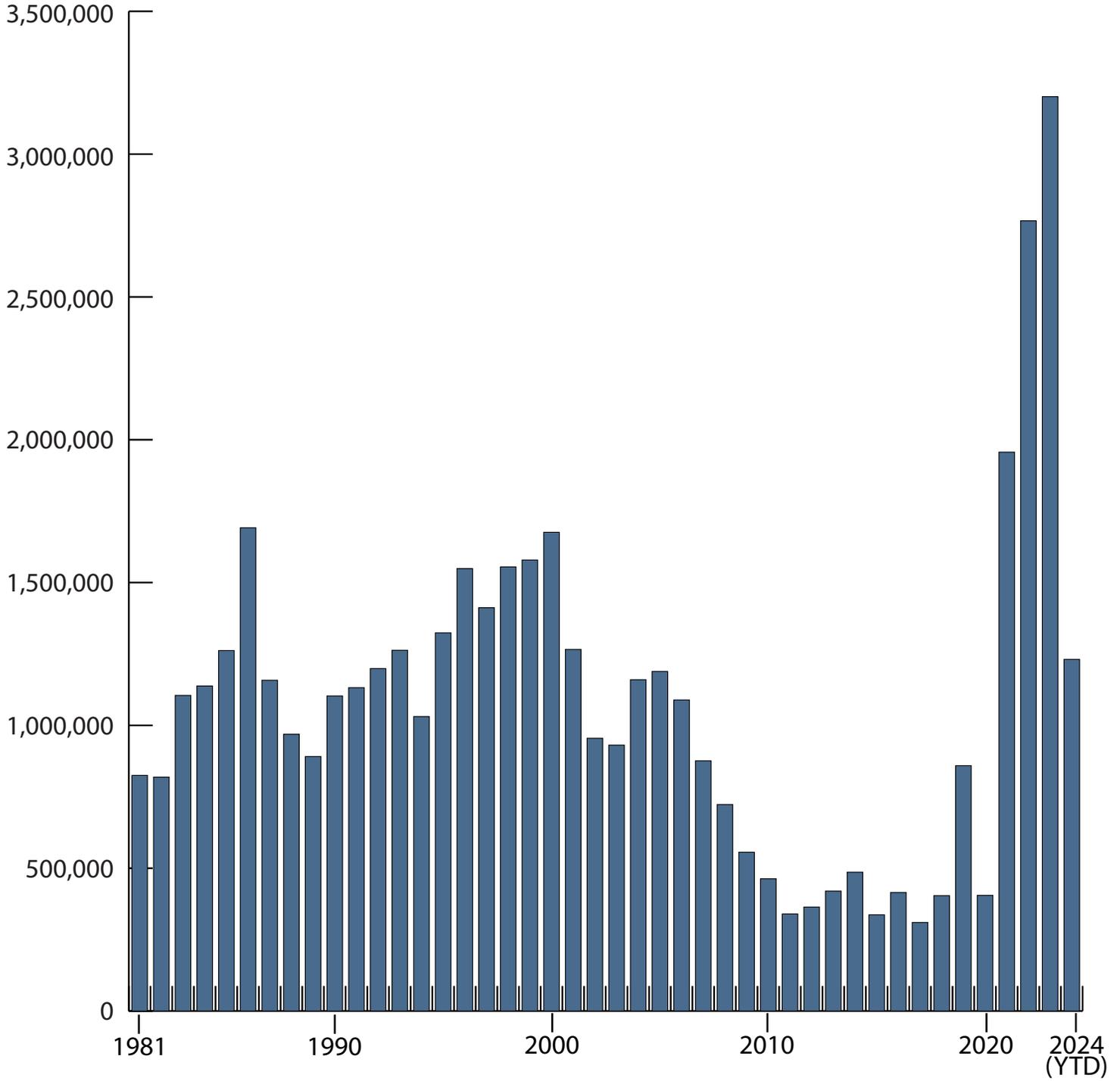
In order to see why this is so, the place to begin is by noting that the popular conception of how illegal immigration has evolved over the last 40 years is entirely wrong.

In the popular conception the "invasion" of illegal immigrants has been steadily increasing for decades, temporarily interrupted only during the Trump administration.

**The reality, however, is actually precisely the reverse.**

The chart below shows the actual situation:

United States Border Patrol Southwest Border Sectors  
Total Encounters by Fiscal Year



The central fact that this chart reveals is that immigration was actually **vastly higher in the 20 year period from 1980 to 2000 than it was in the 20 year period from 2000 to 2019.**

When the historical reality of migration is understood this makes perfect sense.

The modern era of migration began in the early 1980s when a huge demographic boom of young men in Mexico coincided with deteriorating economic conditions that led to declining employment opportunities in both industry and agriculture. Increasing numbers of these young men began to cross the lightly patrolled southwestern U.S. border to work in industries such as agriculture, hotels, restaurants and construction. In the 1990s wives began to join them and small businesses like restaurants and ethnic supermarkets began to proliferate across the country. By the beginning of the Bush administration in 2000 the Mexican presence in the U.S. had become substantial, generating a political backlash to *“illegal immigrants”* during the 2000s.

The pattern of Mexican migration then reached a level of stability. As a report by the Migration Policy Institute noted:

Beginning in 2008 and continuing through 2021, more Mexican unauthorized migrants have left the United States each year than there have been new unauthorized entrants who are from Mexico...Conditions in Mexico had changed. Reductions in family size reduced the pressures on people to work abroad to support their families, and job opportunities started to increase as the Mexican economy recovered from the financial crises of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, as can be seen in the chart, at end of the Obama administration migration had declined to its lowest point in 30 years.

However, around 2014 A dramatic change had also begun to occur. Whereas previously the vast majority of southwest border migrants were Mexicans seeking work, large numbers of Central Americans from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras began arriving at the border, including particularly vulnerable populations such as unaccompanied children and family groups.

Reports in the media generally reported that the cause was a combination of natural disasters, crop failures and deteriorating social conditions which certainly played a part but there was a deeper cause that received far less attention.

## **The Human Smuggling Industry**

In the 1980s and 1990s crossing the huge and lightly patrolled U.S.-Mexican border was relatively easy. In many cases crossing points were actually near the outskirts of major border cities. U.S. Border Control surveillance and enforcement significantly increased in the 2000s but it was still possible to cross in somewhat more remote areas with the help of guides called

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<sup>3</sup>A Turning Point for the Unauthorized Immigrant Population in the United States  
<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/turning-point-us-unauthorized-immigrant-population>

coyotes. In a vast number of small Mexican towns and villages there was an informal network of people who over the years had developed the necessary contacts to assist a migrant in making his or her way across the border for a relatively modest fee.

The major drug smuggling rings had little involvement with this system at that time. In fact they were often predatory – robbing migrants who crossed their areas or holding them for ransom.

Crossing the border was vastly more difficult, however, for the new waves of migrants from Central America who at first did not have the networks of coyotes in their villages and towns that were widespread in Mexico. What emerged instead were more sophisticated, multifaceted human smuggling networks that charged thousands of dollars for their services. But this still made migration attractive for many because a successful migrant could send back sufficient money to support a family and even repay loans.

Local intermediaries became well known and even advertised their services on social media and local bulletin boards and small town radio stations.

A Migration Policy Institute study revealed the major role these networks played. In the 5 year period beginning in 2016, **78%** of Guatemalans used human smuggling networks to cross the border and **64%** of El Salvadorians.

A range of supporting institutions evolved to service the trade.

Bank loans played a major and profoundly predatory role. Nearly 1 of 3 migrants mortgaged their land in order to immigrate and as a result many lost it permanently.

A 2019 article in the Washington Post vividly described the destructive cycle:

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.

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.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/11/04/migrant-debt-cycle/?arc404=true>

The human smuggling networks also provided the necessary transportation and guide services as well as managing payoffs to the regional drug cartels that had begun to charge a “tax” for allowing migrants to cross their territory.

And another vital service the human smuggling networks provided was advice. They told migrants that families with wives and children could cross the border legally. What they actually were doing, however, was advising the migrants about how to exploit the political asylum system which had been originally designed to aid persecuted groups like Jews fleeing Nazi Germany. As The migration policy institute explains:

Once an asylum claim is made, the claimant is first given a “credible fear” test to assess if their claim merits being adjudicated in formal immigration court proceedings. This test has a relatively low threshold, and the vast majority of Central Americans who have arrived since 2014 have met the standard. Claimants who meet this standard are generally released into the United States (or in the case of unaccompanied children, eventually placed with a relative or other guardian). While asylum seekers wait for their case to be proceed through the immigration court system, [which can take years] they are allowed to attend school and, in some situations, work after 180 days have passed since filing their asylum application.<sup>4</sup>

The human smugglers coached the migrants on the exact phrases to use to pass the simple 4 question test that would guarantee that they would be released into the US.

## **The Trump Administration**

By the time Donald Trump took office, it was therefore entirely clear that the human smuggling rings were playing a major role in promoting migration. Had Trump actually wanted to attack the key source of the problem it was clear that this was the most important step.

However, Trump’s clearly expressed, visceral and bigoted loathing of Latinos as human beings made him focus instead on strategies that depended on making the lives of migrants as miserable as possible rather than on attacking the underlying source of the problem. He first began by initiating polices that would prosecute all adult migrants as criminals – which required separating parents from their children. This led to a powerful backlash in public opinion, chaos in the criminal justice system and adverse legal decisions that caused him to reverse the policies.

In 2019, however, Trump then turned to other policies that were more effective. The first was the “Remain in Mexico” policy that prevented migrants from entering the U.S. while their claims of asylum were being processed. This produced extreme hardship. Migrants became easy targets for criminals to exploit and the Mexican government had limited ability to mitigate threats such as kidnapping and extortion. Pressure on Mexico also temporarily produced greater efforts to reduce the flow of migrants before they arrived at the border. And then, in 2020, using Covid as a pretext, Trump closed the border to all unauthorized border crossers.

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<sup>4</sup>Migration at the U.S.-Mexico Border: A Challenge Decades in the Making. Migration policy Institute Study, January 2024

Even this, however, did not stop migrants from coming to the border. The human smuggling networks had recognized a key weakness in U.S. immigration policy. Congress was unwilling to appropriate the tremendous sums of money that would be necessary to create massive detainment camps for migrants or to physically transport them back to their countries of origin. By flooding the border with virtually penniless migrants they could therefore create tremendous pressure to allow many to enter the country which then produced further waves of migrants encouraged by what they observed.

This made it clear that the only feasible approach was to directly deal with the human smuggling networks.

As an article in the New York Times titled, "Smuggling Migrants at the Border Now a Billion-Dollar Business" notes:

*Migrant smuggling on the U.S. southern border has evolved over the past 10 years from a scattered network of freelance "coyotes" into a multi-billion-dollar international business controlled by organized crime, including some of Mexico's most violent drug cartels.*

*Fees typically range from \$4,000, for migrants coming from Latin America, to \$20,000, if they must be moved from Africa, Eastern Europe or Asia, according to Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, an expert on smuggling at George Mason University.*

*For years, independent coyotes paid cartels a tax to move migrants through territory they controlled along the border, and the criminal syndicates stuck to their traditional line of business, drug smuggling, which was far more profitable.*

*That began to change around 2019, Patrick Lechleitner, the acting deputy director at U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, told Congress last year. The sheer number of people seeking to cross made migrant smuggling an irresistible moneymaker for some cartels, he said.*

*The enterprises have teams specializing in logistics, transportation, surveillance, stash houses and accounting – all supporting an industry whose revenues have soared to an **estimated \$13 billion** today according to homeland Security Investigations, the federal agency that investigates such cases.*

*Migrants are moved by plane, bus and private vehicles. In some border regions, such as the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, smugglers affix color-coded bands to the wrists of migrants to designate that they belong to them and what services they are receiving.*

*"They are organizing the merchandise in ways you could never imagine five or 10 years ago," said Ms. Correa-Cabrera.*

*Groups of Central American families who crossed the Rio Grande recently into La Joya, Texas, wore blue bracelets with the logo of the Gulf Cartel, a dolphin, and the word "entregas," or "deliveries" – meaning they intended to surrender to U.S. authorities and seek asylum...*

*Previously, migrants entering Laredo, Texas, waded across the river on their own and faded into the dense, urban landscape. Now, according to interviews with migrants and law enforcement officials, it is impossible to cross without paying a coyote connected to the Cartel del Noreste, a splinter of the Los Zetas syndicate.<sup>5</sup>*

One crucial element in this process is social media which energetically and dishonestly promotes the ease of migration and advises migrants on how to “beat the system”. As an article in The New York Times noted:

*“The smuggling organizations are spreading misinformation with a global reach that they couldn’t do before,” said John Modlin, the Border Patrol’s Tucson sector chief, who is coordinating the response to border crossings in Arizona and California. “In the past, at best, they could talk to the village they were in, or a small region. Through social media, they can hit people all around the world.”*

*In the last year alone, migration-related hashtags on TikTok have received **more than a billion views**, while Facebook groups with names like “Darién New Route to Panama” have attracted hundreds of thousands of followers. Sometimes those posting are other migrants, explaining what to bring or where to start the trek. Other posts are written by swindlers claiming that the route is not that difficult or even that the United States is offering sanctuary to certain nationalities.*

*On TikTok, a company called VeneTours makes the trip sound like a vacation. “Four days in the jungle with responsible guides,” reads a VeneTours post that was linked to a Colombian phone number. “All of Central America with VIP transport and guides + cell phone chip so you’re always in touch. Lodging, food, safe passage 100% guaranteed.”<sup>6</sup>*

In 2019 the story began to spread across literally hundreds of thousands of social media sites that if Biden was elected the border would be “open.” It was clear that if the Democrats wanted to prevent a massive increase in migration they had to very aggressively lower these expectations.

## The Massive Democratic Miscalculation

But the powerful public reaction against Trump’s most brutal policies like family separation gave progressive Democrats a deeply misleading impression – that there was solid majority support for a vastly liberalized system for immigration. Immigration advocates argued that this kind of policy would both mobilize the Democratic base and be popular with swing voters.

This perspective was clearly reflected in the positions of the Democratic candidates in the 2020 Democratic primaries. In a June 2019 debate nine of the ten Democratic presidential candidates called for decriminalizing border crossings. Two candidates, Elizabeth Warren and Kirsten Gillibrand, advocated completely dismantling the US Immigrations and customs Enforcement Agency. And no Democrat candidate, including Joe Biden, proposed any specific plan for re-establishing control of the southern border.

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<sup>5</sup><https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/25/us/migrant-smuggling-evolution.html>

<sup>6</sup><https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/09/world/americas/migrants-darien-gap.html>

Biden carried this approach into his administration. As the Migration Policy Institute noted:

President Biden’s campaign promises related to immigration shaped the first two years of his administration’s approach to the border, migration, and asylum. As a candidate, Biden had been sharply critical of Trump administration actions that limited migrants’ ability to claim asylum at the border. ...The Biden campaign proposed a broadscale reversal of Trump-era border and immigration policies, replacing them with a more expansive and humane approach to managing the border and migrant flows.

The initial stages of the Biden administration were consumed largely with attempts at dismantling Trump policies and mitigating their humanitarian consequences. **The Biden administration released 296 executive actions on immigration during its first year in office.**<sup>7</sup>

The results were predictable. As the chart on page 5 shows, in 2021 more migrants appeared at the border than at any time in the previous 40 years and the total continued to grow even higher in 2022 and 2023.

Historic numbers of migrants were coming from every region of the world.

**The Caribbean:** Cuba, Haiti, Martinique.

**South America:** Venezuela, Columbia, Ecuador

**Countries around the globe:** Africa, Asia, India, the Middle East

Supporting this new, global flow of migrants was a proliferation of “Travel Agencies” across the world advertising visa-free travel to the western hemisphere and connecting customers to smuggling organizations.

The news media began to report the new reality:

“Venezuela’s most powerful gang has built a human trafficking empire across South America” (the Economist)

“Brazen smugglers saw through border wall, coordinate travel from Africa and Asia to bring tens of thousands across the U.S. Mexican border.” (NYT)

“Costa Rica and Panama are bussing people through their countries to ease the concentration of people along their borders” (NYT)

The Biden administration had absolutely no realistic strategy for dealing with the new reality. As the situation became impossible to ignore in the fall of 2023 and the beginning of 2024 it began a haphazard attempt to reintroduce a wide range of more restrictive Trump-era policies but with no coherent overall strategy behind them.

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<sup>7</sup>“Migration at the U.S.-Mexico Border: A Challenge Decades in the Making.” Migration Policy Institute Study, January 2024

And stunningly, there was—and is—still no clear focus on the human smuggling organizations that have now metastasized into a giant, distributed global network.

There is no reason why the flow of migrants cannot increase even further. The London Economist noted one study that found that there are **one hundred and sixty million people** around the world who would like to come to the U.S. and with the rapidly declining costs of travel and the extensive network of human smuggling organizations available to assist them there is no obvious reason why the flow should not increase even further.

## The Alternative

As a result, Democrats have to offer an entirely new strategy regarding migration – one that recognizes two fundamental realities.

1. *That the current massive global migration is produced by organized human smuggling networks and that these networks have a profound material interest in destabilizing and overwhelming the American immigration system.*
2. *That the operation of a 13 billion dollar industry cannot be stopped simply by tightening restrictions at the border.*

The alternative is to offer an approach based on making a massive financial investment in **directly disrupting the operations of the human smuggling networks**. In 2013 America spent over 16 billion dollars on counter-terrorism operations designed to prevent terrorist attacks and most Americans would agree that re-establishing a stable and properly functioning American Immigration System is also a worthy goal.

The human smuggling networks have several major vulnerabilities that such a strategy could attack. First, the social media networks they employ are essential to recruiting and coordinating migrant traffic and could be undermined with the same tactics that were developed to disrupt Jihadist computer networks after 9-11. Second, the distribution of the initial payments that are made by prospective migrants to the human smugglers are the lifeblood of the system and could be disrupted at various points within the global and regional financial system. There are also a network of physical “choke-points” in the migration pathway that could be targeted (in February 2024, for example, traffic across the Darien Gap where tens of thousands of migrants pass every month was temporarily disrupted when only a handful of the boat captains who provide transport across a critical river crossing were arrested.)

If Democrats had proposed a massive, coordinated campaign to aggressively disrupt the logistics, transportation and social media propaganda operations of the human smuggling networks along these lines during Biden’s first campaign they would have offered voters a plausible and compelling alternative to their current pathetic and hapless disarray.

Realistically speaking it is now almost certainly too late to significantly change voters’ perceptions before the 2024 elections. Opinion polls consistently show that the Democratic failure to have dealt with uncontrolled migration is the most powerful reason for the high level of support that Donald Trump now receives and he is already presenting “illegal” migration as the major theme of his campaign.

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But regardless of the outcome next November, a new approach of this kind is realistically the only option for the future that can give Democrats a coherent and plausible strategy for dealing with modern migration.

(Note: For a further discussion of how this strategy can be executed see the following TDS Strategy Memo:)

“Immigration ‘Chaos’ Could Sink Democrats in 2024 – And the Democratic Narrative Simply Doesn’t Work. Here’s An Alternative That Does.”

[https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/\\_memos/tds\\_SM\\_Levison\\_\\_Immigration\\_Chaos\\_vf.pdf](https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Levison__Immigration_Chaos_vf.pdf)