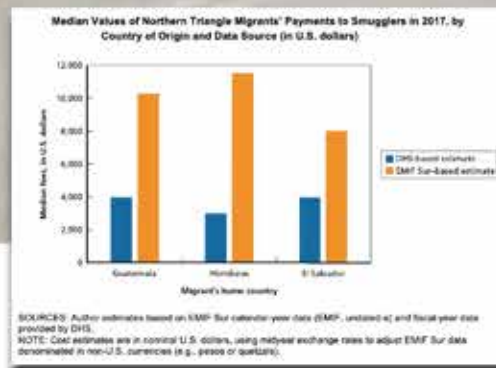




TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

IMMIGRATION "CHAOS" COULD SINK DEMOCRATS IN 2024 – AND THE DEMOCRATIC NARRATIVE SIMPLY DOESN'T WORK. HERE'S AN ALTERNATIVE THAT DOES.

BY
ANDREW LEVISON



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

IMMIGRATION “CHAOS” COULD SINK DEMOCRATS IN 2024 – AND THE DEMOCRATIC NARRATIVE SIMPLY DOESN’T WORK.

HERE’S AN ALTERNATIVE THAT DOES.

By ANDREW LEVISON

During the 40 years since the 1980s when immigration first became a significant social issue political debate on the subject has generally followed reliably partisan lines. Conservative Republicans denounced “*illegal aliens*” sneaking across the border to “*steal American jobs*” while Democrats took a generally benign and sympathetic view.

In fact, during the Bush and Obama administrations the debate on immigration was far more heavily focused on whether the Immigration and Naturalization Service should attempt to deport large numbers of the migrants who were already in the country—as many Republicans demanded—or if new comprehensive legislation should be negotiated to revamp the laws regarding immigration, including the legalization of many immigrants who had already been living in the country for years. Tightening border security was a distinctly secondary element in this debate.

Trump returned the issue of the border to political prominence with his promise to “*build a wall*” and bitter characterizations of migrants as “*rapists and drug dealers*.” Democrats responded by denouncing Trump’s barely disguised bigotry and his extreme punitive measures against migrants including family separations. In his 2000 campaign Trump very notably downplayed the issue, suggesting that its political potency as a wedge issue was limited.

Immigration has now reemerged as a “hot button” political issue, however, as the number of migrants crossing the border has dramatically increased and is severely taxing the resources of major Democratic cities as well as those on the southwestern border where the overflow of migrants had been a long-standing problem.

For the first time the issue of how to control the border is actually beginning to seriously divide Democrats and threatens to emerge as a major election year issue if present trends continue. Current measures seem—and indeed are—hastily improvised stopgaps that do not promise plausible long term solutions. The Republican charges of “*chaos on the border*” seem perilously close to reality and opinion polls confirm that this perception is seriously damaging Democratic candidates. A September 2023 poll by Democracy Corps found that voters preferred the Republicans 66% to 34% when asked which party was “better on the state of the border” and support for the Democrats would have been even lower if the question had directly mentioned “illegal immigration.”

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*.

Moving Beyond Clichés

For Democrats to effectively confront this challenge the first step is to move beyond the conventional Democratic narrative about migrants which essentially portrays them as helpless victims who are fleeing absolutely intolerable conditions in their home countries – conditions that leave them no choice except to desperately seek safety. Both the progressive and mainstream media routinely describe the migrants as fleeing “gangs, violence, kidnapping, poverty and destitution” a characterization that seems confirmed by the vast number of photographs in major newspapers, magazines and TV news programs that depict utterly exhausted, disheveled men and women, many carrying young children standing forlornly before tall fences or in the custody of border patrol officers. For Progressives, the images are powerfully reminiscent of media images in previous years of desperate refugees fleeing from wars, ethnic conflicts or massive drought in sub-Saharan Africa.

For many Democrats this is their entire perspective on the issue. Migrants are helpless victims escaping intolerable conditions and the only possible response is therefore to provide humanitarian aid. It is quite striking that there is no broad Democratic long-term plan or agenda for restoring an orderly system of border control even though most Americans consider it an important goal. Politicians may speak vaguely of improving conditions in the home countries from which the migrants come as a long term solution but this is so vast an undertaking that no serious, coherent plan to “fix” these failed states has ever been proposed.

The Historical Background

To develop a new Democratic approach that more adequately addresses the current reality the place to begin is by placing the current migration in the context of the 40 year history that precedes it. In the 1970s and early 1980s large numbers of young, unmarried Mexican men began crossing the lightly patrolled border seeking work, often entering the U.S., working for a period, and then returning home before returning to cross the border once again. By the 1990s wives and families 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 from 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...Many moved to the United States during the economic boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s to work in construction, agriculture, or service-sector jobs. The 2008-09 recession abruptly reduced job opportunities and many immigrants moved back to Mexico. Additionally, 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.¹

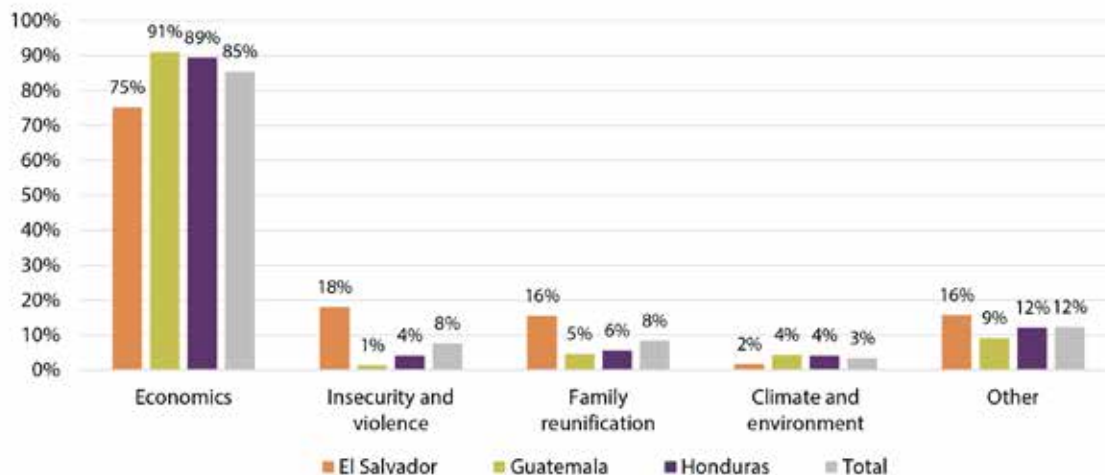
¹<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/turning-point-us-unauthorized-immigrant-population>

This stabilization was particularly striking because during the period beginning in the mid-2000s joint Mexican-U.S. operations to “decapitate” the major drug cartels also produced a disastrous collapse of the previous stability that had been presided over by the major cartels and led to the emergence of hundreds of decentralized criminal gangs that began to prey on small businesses and families in every region of Mexico. Cab drivers, street vendors, bars, cantinas, restaurants, drug stores and other modest enterprises were extorted for weekly payments with violent reprisal for resistance. Kidnapping became a major threat even to people of relatively modest means. Battles between gangs and extortion of honest citizens reached grotesque levels. More than 100,000 people have “disappeared” (i.e., been murdered) in Mexico in recent years and 53,000 unidentified bodies lie in police morgues.² **Yet it is crucial to note that this did not lead to a massive increase in migration to America.**

While the level of migration from Mexico stabilized and even declined, however, the level of migration from Central America began to sharply increase. Although this is often mostly attributed to gang threats and violence, for vast numbers of the migrants it was rather the same hope for a better life that had driven Mexicans to migrate before.

People who have friends and family connections in the Central American community are aware of how widespread this traditional motive for migration has always been among Central American migrants but concrete evidence is presented by an extraordinarily extensive opinion survey of over **12 thousand** Central American respondents conducted by the Migration Policy Institute:³

Factors Reported to Have Motivated Members of Surveyed Households to Migrate Recently, by Country of Origin, 2021



Notes: Recent migrants are those household members who were said to have migrated within the five years prior to the survey. Percentages represent the share of recent migrants reported by surveyed households who were said to have left due to each factor. This survey question allowed for multiple responses, meaning the sum of percentages can exceed 100 percent. The “economics” category includes looking for a better job, salary, or working conditions; unemployment; lack of money to buy food; lack of money to cover other basic needs (including health, education, housing, clothing, and utilities); and desire to send remittances. The “insecurity and violence” category includes insecurity and domestic violence. The “family reunification” category just includes family reunification. The “climate and environment” category includes deterioration of livelihoods due to natural hazards (including floods, droughts, volcanic eruption, hurricanes, and plagues); the direct impact of a natural hazard; and the loss of land due to land use changes. The “other” category includes wanting to move to study; for cultural reasons or custom; for health-related reasons (including treatments, surgeries, medical consultations, or medicines); for tourism; the “other” option in the survey; and those respondents who did not respond to this question about motivating factors or who reported not knowing.
 Source: Authors’ analysis of WFP household survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2021.

²<https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/09/americas/mexico-americans-kidnapped-disappeared-intl-latam/index.html>

³<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/motivations-costs-central-american-migration>

This seems so completely at odds with the standard Democratic “Desperate Refugee Narrative” that for many it is hard to accept. The reports describing the desperate flight from death threats and gang violence as the primary motivation are so vivid that they seem impossible to square with this conclusion.

A significant explanation for this apparent contradiction lies in the fact that while gang activity in many Central American towns and cities did dramatically increase in recent years and has indeed been a major consideration in leading many Central Americans to migrate, a very substantial number of the most vivid first person media reports of assault, rape, beatings, extortion and robbery in the American media **actually describe events that occurred during the profoundly dangerous journey to the border or in the squalid camps where migrants were trapped while waiting to cross.** The heartbreaking photos of destitute migrants arriving at the border to a profound degree reflects the horrible experience they endure during their journey, not their conditions in the towns and villages where they had lived before.

This does not in any way diminish the genuine anguish of the victims who have suffered violence in Central America but it is a vital reality for Democrats to grasp because many non-Democratic Americans simply do not believe that all migrants are actually desperate refugees from gang violence or near starvation and insisting that this is the case simply causes them to reject the Democratic perspective as a whole.

The Human Smuggling Organizations

There is also a second aspect of the Democratic “*Desperate Refugee Narrative*” – the idea that the flow of migrants represents an uncoordinated flow of separate individuals traveling by themselves across Central America and Mexico and arriving at the border in small groups or entirely alone.

In the 1970s this was actually often true but by the mid-1990s an increasing number of Mexican migrants began to use local guides from their villages called “Coyotes” to help them get across the now more heavily patrolled U.S. border.

In more recent years the situation has once again profoundly changed. 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.

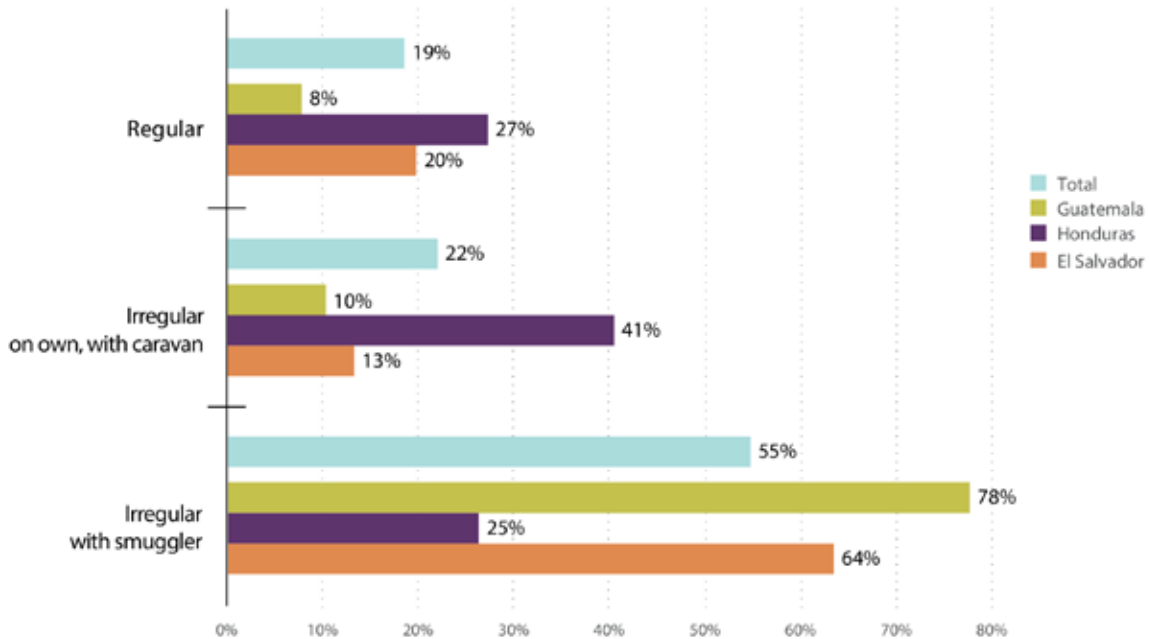
Groups of Central American families who crossed the Rio Grande recently into La Joya, Texas, wore blue bracelets with the logo of the Gulf Cartel, a dolphin, and the word “entregas,” or “deliveries” — meaning they intended to surrender to U.S. authorities and seek asylum...

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.⁴

⁴Smuggling Migrants at the Border Now a Billion-Dollar Business - nyt

The extent to which central American migrants use organized human smuggling channels is illustrated by the following chart from the Migration Policy Institute poll:

Regular and Irregular Migration Channels Reportedly Used by Recent Migrant Members of Survey Respondents' Households, by Country of Origin, 2021



Notes: Recent migrants are those household members who were said to have migrated within the five years prior to the survey. Figure excludes individuals whose responses were coded as "don't know" or "preferred not to answer," and therefore these percentages may not add up to 100 percent.
Source: Authors' analysis of WFP household survey in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, 2021.

Looking more closely at these figures reveals the massive role of the organized criminal gangs. **78%** of Guatemalans used human smuggling networks and **64%** of El Salvadorians. Hondurans were less likely to use smugglers because the Honduran smuggling network was less developed.

As for how the migrants financed the journey, the survey then noted:

For example, looking at the most expensive pathway—irregular migration with a smuggler—55 percent of migrants reportedly relied primarily on support from family and friends (in country and abroad), 28 percent acquired bank loans, and 9 percent used their own savings or assets.

The role of bank loans has played a major and profoundly predatory role in financing Central American migration – 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.⁵

Migration from Central America has also slowed in recent years. Instead, the most recent trend which has turbocharged the current crisis is migration that begins in Columbia.

The Darien Gap

An article in the Migration Policy Institute, “How the Treacherous Darien Gap Became a Migration Crossroads of the Americas”, described the current situation.

Until 2021 the numbers of people crossing the jungle were relatively inconsequential in comparison with other migratory pathways in the Americas. That year, more than 130,000 migrants successfully crossed the jungle on foot, up from an average of fewer than 11,000 per year during the previous decade. In 2022, arrivals jumped to almost 250,000 people. That number was surpassed in just the first eight months of 2023, and more than 500,000 people are on pace to cross by the end of this year.

...There are multiple reasons for this increase. Many migrants in South America and the Caribbean face difficulties getting visas to Mexico and Central American countries and therefore lack alternative pathways to reach North America. As the route through the Darien has become more established, migrants have shared information about the best ways to cross it...

Initially, migrants crossing the Darien Gap tended to be from Haiti or Cuba... In 2022, though, the demographics changed. For the first time, most of those arriving in Panama after crossing the jungle were from Venezuela. Slightly more than 3,000 Venezuelans were recorded as having crossed the Darien between 2010 and 2021; in 2022, the number exceeded 150,000. One reason for the precipitous increase was the decision by Mexico and several Central American countries to require visas for Venezuelans that year, spurring many who were unable to secure legal entry to instead cross through the Darien.

One other notable trend in the Darien has been the movement of people from outside the Western Hemisphere—particularly Central and West Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia—who first travel to South America and use the Darien to reach the United States or Canada. Since 2015, Panama has registered more than 100,000 extracontinental migrants from at least 60 African and Asian countries.⁶

⁵<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/11/04/migrant-debt-cycle/?arc404=true>

⁶<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/darien-gap-migration-crossroads#:~:text=In%202022%2C%20arrivals%20jumped%20to,the%20Darien%20in%20recent%20months.>

An article in the New York Times, “A Ticket to Disney? Politicians Charge Millions to Send Migrants to U.S.” described the situation.

The boat ride to reach the rainforest: \$40. A guide on the treacherous route once you start walking: \$170. A porter to carry your backpack over the muddy mountains: \$100. A plate of chicken and rice after arduous climbing: \$10. Special, all-inclusive packages to make the perilous slog faster and more bearable, with tents, boots and other necessities: \$500, or more.

Hundreds of thousands of migrants are now pouring through a sliver of jungle known as the Darién Gap, the only land route to the United States from South America [and] the entrepreneurs behind the migrant gold rush are not underground smugglers hiding from the authorities. They are politicians, prominent businessmen and elected leaders, now sending thousands of migrants toward the United States in plain sight each day — and charging millions of dollars a month for the privilege.

A registered nonprofit foundation manages the entire route from Acandí to the border with Panama — setting prices for the journey, collecting fees and running sprawling campsites in the middle of the jungle. It has hired more than 2,000 local guides and backpack carriers. Migrants pay for tiers of what the foundation calls “services,” including the basic \$170 guide and security package to the border. Then a migration “adviser” wraps two bracelets around their wrists as proof of payment.

“Like a ticket to Disney,” said Renny Montilla, 25, a construction worker from Venezuela.

Hanging over the entire business is a large and powerful drug-trafficking group called the Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces, sometimes known as the Gulf Clan. Its control over this part of northern Colombia is so complete that the country’s ombudsman’s office calls the group the region’s “hegemonic” armed actor.

This new economy, run in large part by elected leaders, has acted as an accelerant, emboldening more people to take — and pay for — the journey than ever.⁷

The Two Hard Realities About Migration

As a result, in responding to the current spike in the flow of migrants Democrats need to face two key realities.

1. *Modern migration is run and controlled by a massive network of hemispheric-wide criminal organizations that is making billions of dollars from migrant smuggling.*
2. *It is in the interests of this massive network to keep the wave of migration flowing — and to do this it is in their direct financial interest to destabilize and overwhelm the American immigration system so that more migrants are allowed to enter the U.S.*

This sounds like the plot of a lurid Hollywood movie that portrays a vast criminal enterprise headed by an evil mastermind but it is not. The massive human smuggling network is a decentralized network of loosely connected operations. There is no single “master plan” that guides it but the normal operation of the “free market” produces essentially the same result.

⁷<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/14/world/americas/migrant-business-darien-gap.html>

From this point of view depositing massive numbers of migrants on the border is profoundly beneficial because it forces the U.S. to allow many to enter the U.S. which in turn profoundly encourages more people to attempt the journey. Even Trump's most draconian measures to keep migrants in Mexico only reduced but did not stop the flow.

The Role of Social Media

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, Darién-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."⁸

On two previous occasions, the lies that human smugglers circulated have had especially destructive consequences:

1. At one point in the past decade human smugglers repeatedly circulated the myth that anyone who arrived at the border with children could automatically enter the U.S. – and on this basis thousands of immigrants came with their small children, something that they would not have done in the past. This was in fact one of the central myths that was circulated among the caravans and busloads of migrants who only discovered it was not true when it was too late and they were trapped in squalid refugee camps on the Mexican side of the border.
2. Beginning in 2019 the human smuggling organizations began to widely promote on social media the idea that a Biden victory would "open the border" and allow vast numbers of migrants to enter the U.S. On this basis large numbers of migrants arrived at the border and were heartbroken to discover that they had been deceived.

⁸<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/09/world/americas/migrants-darien-gap.html>

The Asylum Crisis

The new problem that is now deeply destabilizing the border and leading to the massive release of migrants into the country is the abuse of the Asylum process, a previously minor element in the U.S. immigration system. Beginning several years ago human smugglers began telling potential customers that they were guaranteed to get into the U.S. if they claimed the right of asylum. Smugglers and social media informed migrants of the precise legal phrases to use that would obligate border authorities to accept them as seeking asylum. It was unquestionably a clever strategy but the result has been to massively overload the asylum system with hundreds of thousands of applications and consequent delays of several years before a hearing. The result is that—faced with the unacceptable alternative of creating a giant detention system—over a million migrants have been released into the country and tens of thousands with genuine and legitimate claims cannot have their appeals evaluated.

As Fareed Zakaria notes:

The truth is the asylum system is out of control. The concept of asylum dates to the years after World War II, when the United States created a separate path to enter the country for those who feared religious, ethnic or political persecution — a noble idea born in the shadow of the United States' refusal to take in Jews in the 1930s. It was used sparingly for decades, mostly applying to cases of extreme discrimination [based specifically on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion.]

But the vast majority of people entering the southern border are really traditional migrants, fleeing poverty and violence. This is a sad situation, but it does not justify giving them special consideration above others around the world who seek to come to the United States for similar reasons – but patiently go through the normal process.”⁹

In a later column he adds:

In a 17-month period between March 2021 and August 2022, the federal government **released more than 1 million migrants** into the United States and lost track of over **177,000 of them** who had failed to give an address or had provided an invalid one. When the system of due process collapses, as it has, it is most unfair to those who have legitimate claims to asylum or legal immigrant status.¹⁰

Faced with this dilemma, Democrats have found themselves without any coherent alternative, removing some obstacles to migration as inhumane but then casting about for temporary measures to deal with an increasing migrant flow.

This creates the foundation for a deeply cynical but effective Republican attack. Republicans assert that the border is “completely out of control” and promise to reinstate the polices of the Trump administration which they falsely claim had “solved the problem”. Democrats respond by decrying the obvious cruelty of their proposals but have no plausible alternative to offer. In fact, for the most part, Democrats messaging is based on simply reciting the “desperate refugee narrative” which most Americans do not accept as an adequate response to the problem.

⁹https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/biden-wants-to-reform-immigration-trumps-legacy-is-in-the-way/2021/03/11/ded049ac-82a9-11eb-81db-b02f0398f49a_story.html

¹⁰<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/09/15/immigration-democrats-errors-voters/>

The Alternative: Disrupting the Human Smuggling Networks

To effectively counter the Republican attacks, Democrats have to offer a perspective that recognizes two fundamental realities about modern migration.

1. *It must recognize the reality that the current massive 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. *It must assert that contrary to the vacuous rhetoric of the GOP 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 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.

In their desperate quest for extremist support Republican candidates have proposed major military attacks on Mexico to disrupt drug cartels – proposals that would be literally disastrous if they were even remotely serious. The disruption of the human smuggling networks would instead be based on serious, detailed planning, developed in cooperation with the Mexican and Central American countries, to develop measures to disrupt the logistics, transportation networks and social media propaganda operations of the human smuggling networks and reduce the flow of migrants at a wide range of geographical “choke points” between Columbia and the U.S. border.

Consider a single example. As the articles above have shown, at many points along the route migrants are extorted for bribes again and again by police, border officials, boat captains, bus drivers, guides, service providers and criminal gangs. If only one of these actors is given the opportunity to make significantly more money by blocking the passage of migrants rather than extorting them the entire pathway would be disrupted. “Counter-bribery” of this kind, applied at multiple points along a wide number of different routes can sharply reduce the level of migration that occurs.¹¹

By essentially making major investments in financing anti-human smuggling initiatives at key points along the migrant routes and providing extensive prior warning to potential migrants via social and traditional media that such action will be launched in order to dissuade them from attempting the journey in the first place, a realistic strategy for reducing the number of migrants can be developed.

Many Democrats will quite logically object that the vast investment of money and effort involved in a strategy of this kind would be better spent in providing increased humanitarian aid to migrants and for social programs in their home countries. As a purely logical and moral argument this is reasonable and indeed compelling.

¹¹The smuggling operations would, of course, inevitably seek alternative pathways but as the major road, rail and river transportation networks in Central America and Southern Mexico are relatively limited alternative routes would necessarily be more remote and inefficient. Moreover, with modern satellite and thermal aerial surveillance technology sudden changes in the pattern of movement of significant numbers of northbound people or vehicles would also be difficult to conceal.

But as a political argument it is irrelevant.

Democrats cannot win the political support of swing voters and indeed of most Americans with proposals to spend billions of dollars more than America does now on improving the treatment of migrants. They can, on the other hand, put Republicans on the defensive by proposing a plan aimed at reestablishing a properly functioning immigration system and a much more secure border by launching an aggressive international campaign designed to disrupt the operations of the human smuggling networks instead of brutalizing migrants when they arrive at the Rio Grande.

The Republicans have just released an extensive immigration agenda that includes reinstating most of the harsh measures undertaken during the Trump administration. If the response of Democratic candidates is limited to attacking the Republican agenda as cruel and inhumane based on the desperate refugee narrative these candidates will not succeed.

If they propose instead a massive, coordinated campaign to aggressively disrupt the logistics, transportation and social media propaganda operations of the human smuggling networks, defining the international smuggling rings rather than the migrants as the source of the problem, they will offer voters a plausible and compelling alternative.

As Ruy Teixeira has noted:

Democrats moving forward have to accept the reality of American public opinion and politics that border security is a huge issue that cannot be avoided in any attempt to reform the immigration system...public opinion polling over the years has consistently shown overwhelming majorities in favor of more spending and emphasis on border security. The public has indeed become more sympathetic to immigrants and immigration, partially as a thermostatic reaction to the practices of the Trump administration. But that does not mean that Democrats can simply be the opposite of Trump on this issue. He was closed; we're open! He was mean; we're nice!...voters want an immigration system that is both reasonably generous and humane and also under control. Democrats ignore the "under control" part at their peril.¹²

¹²<https://washingtonmonthly.com/2021/03/04/the-democratic-road-forward-on-immigration/>