



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

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Trump's blatant and vicious appeal to pure prejudice regarding immigrants and immigration has led many progressives and Democrats to dismiss all of his white working class supporters as racists rather than understand their concerns and seek ways to regain their support.

The degree to which Trump has debased the debate about immigration is stunning. In the 1980's, when "illegal" immigration from Mexico first became a significant issue, the major objections raised by opponents were specific and concrete issues—that immigrants would take jobs from American workers and burden the country with the costs of providing them with public services.

In the early 2000's, on the other hand, the 9-11 attack and the shift of the major drug smuggling routes from the Caribbean to Mexico added the notion that immigrants now also included terrorists and drug smugglers among their numbers (although the reality was that neither problem was actually directly related to the Mexican and other Latin American migrants who were crossing the border on foot).¹

Trump, however, has defined the issue in clearly and starkly racist terms. Undocumented immigrants are not only "rapists" and "murderers" but are literally "dirty" and "diseased"—in effect bestial sub-humans comparable to rats and other animals. This is the language of the most blatant and undisguised racism.

The progressive and Democratic response has been to oppose Trump and the GOP in equally categorical terms, describing immigrants as men, women and children whose only crime is poverty and desperation. As a result, all objections to immigration are dismissed as simply a smokescreen for racism.

Andrew Levison is the author of *The White Working Class Today: Who They Are, How They Think and How Progressives Can Regain Their Support*. Along with Ed Kilgore, he is coordinator of *The White Working Class Roundtable*.

¹The extremely small number of Middle Eastern terrorists who did illegally enter the U.S. from abroad arrived by commercial airline with falsified papers. Similarly, the vast majority of the narcotics that enter the U.S. do so concealed in the thousands of 18-wheeler trucks, vans and cars that pass through the major border stations every day as well as in small plane and more recently, underground tunnels. The amount that enters the U.S. that is actually carried in backpacks by "mules" paddling across the Rio Grande or hiking across the desert is a tiny fraction of the total.

On the other hand, however, Democrats are vague about the alternatives. As Alex Shephard notes in *The New Republic*: “the Democrats’ immigration policy hasn’t really evolved [in recent years]. While some innovations have cropped up, notably “Abolish ICE,” the party’s position on immigration remains opaque. They’re against Trump’s policies, to be sure. But it’s rarely clear what precise policies the party supports.”²

Since opinion polls have consistently shown that most Americans are not bitterly anti-immigrant and do not support draconian measures like mass deportation, this reaction does not immediately seem to present a major problem for Democrats in 2020. On the contrary, because Latinos are an increasing part of the Democratic coalition it seems reasonable to a significant number of progressives to support demands for “open borders” or “abolishing ICE.”

But, in fact, this does present a major problem. While most Americans do not share Trump’s visceral loathing of Latin Americans and actually support a range of positive measures such as providing a path to citizenship for long time, law-abiding undocumented immigrants, a very substantial group also supports the demand that America regain control of the southern border and prevent further “illegal” immigration.

Simply dismissing all these voters as racists who do not deserve any response other than condemnation is a profound mistake—one that will endanger Democratic hopes of winning the presidency in 2020 and almost certainly place the Senate entirely out of reach. Democrats need to provide a reasonable response to the genuine concerns that do exist.³

In fact, it must be recognized that there is a troubling element of elitism in the progressive and Democratic attitude toward the views of ordinary working class Americans, both African-American and white, on this issue. Many college-educated Americans simply do not see the problems that many less educated, more economically modest Americans do indeed perceive and which create the foundation for their demand to secure the border. Among the educated the view is very widespread that immigrants do not really compete with American citizens for jobs in any significant way but only “*take jobs whites just don’t want to do.*” Equally, observing their own social world, most educated Americans simply do not perceive situations where citizens like themselves are in competition with immigrants for government resources and services.

The fact that educated Americans do not see these problems, however, does not mean that they do not exist. Let us look at them in turn.

1. Job Competition

Historically it has always been true that much of the most backbreaking work in American agriculture has been done by Mexican workers and that employers have repeatedly found that, in contrast, white workers will simply not do such jobs.

²<https://newrepublic.com/article/152799/trump-thinks-democrats-immigration-problem-right>

³See, for example:

https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_levison_2020_political_3_strategy_points_.pdf

Looking around at the tremendous degree to which Latino and Latina immigrants now seem ubiquitous as dishwashers and hotel maids, for example, it is easy to assume that these jobs have been equally abandoned by white workers and that these immigrants are doing tasks that whites are no longer willing to perform.

The reality is more complex. What has actually occurred in many cases is that as Latino, Latina and other immigrants became available, the conditions of the “job” that white and African-American workers once did were increasingly downgraded and made more onerous and the salary frozen or diminished until “the job” in question was no longer the same “job” that it had been before. The kitchen that once employed two dishwashers now employed only one, although the workload remained the same. The hotel that once required maids to clean 8 rooms per shift now required 12 or 13. The “job” that an observer now sees is not one that was first abandoned by whites and African-Americans and only then occupied by Latinos. It was the growing availability of Latino and Latina workers that made it possible to degrade the pay and quality of the job until it reached the point where only immigrants would take it.

And beyond this, in many rural and small town areas there was a deeper transition going on. As a recent article in *Business Week* noted:

By the 1990’s food companies determined that they could save money by moving operations out of cities such as Des Moines and Cedar Rapids and closer to farms and livestock barns. In pursuit of even more efficiency, they then changed the nature of the jobs themselves. Meatpacking plants for example traditionally offered lots of skilled [and unionized] “master contract” position that might pay \$85,000 or so in today’s dollars. Industry wide, most of those had been “de-skilled” by the dawn of the 21st century. The new factories ran like assembly lines, with low wage workers assigned to the same repetitive tasks all day long. [Wages that once averaged around \$18 per hour declined to \$6 per hour].⁴

As progressive political analyst John Judis wryly noted, “This didn’t happen because the people who worked in meat packing plants decided they wanted to become computer programmers. The companies brought in immigrants, including undocumented immigrants, to undermine the unions and depress wages. Something similar has happened in construction and low-skilled services, where documented and undocumented immigrants were brought in to undermine unionization.”⁵

Harvard labor economist George Borjas is the leading exponent of the view that competition between immigrants and native born workers has indeed reduced the earnings of the latter.⁶ As he says:

Both low- and high-skilled natives are affected by the influx of immigrants. But because a disproportionate percentage of immigrants have few skills, it is low-skilled American workers, including many blacks and Hispanics, who have suffered most from this wage

⁴Business Week, Jan 7th 2019

⁵<https://prospect.org/article/two-sides-immigration-policy>

⁶Borjas is sometimes dismissed as a “conservative” by progressives because he is the leading exponent of this thesis but any serious reading of his policy related articles, however, reveals that this is a distortion of his views. See, for example:

<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/09/trump-clinton-immigration-economy-unemployment-jobs-214216>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/02/opinion/trump-immigration-dreamers.html>

<https://talkingpointsmemo.com/cafe/john-judis-interview-george-borjas>

dip. The monetary loss is sizable. The typical high school dropout earns about \$25,000 annually. According to census data, immigrants admitted in the past two decades lacking a high school diploma have increased the size of the low-skilled workforce by roughly 25 percent. As a result, the earnings of this particularly vulnerable group dropped by between \$800 and \$1,500 each year.

We don't need to rely on complex statistical calculations to see the harm being done to some workers. Simply look at how employers have reacted. A decade ago, Crider Inc., a chicken processing plant in Georgia, was raided by immigration agents, and 75 percent of its workforce vanished over a single weekend. Shortly after, Crider placed an ad in the local newspaper announcing job openings at *higher wages*.⁷

In another article Borjas noted a similar example:

This summer, the newspapers were reporting that in Cape Cod, because of a shortage of immigrants, employers had to go out and offer higher wages. This real-world response is worth thinking about. The argument isn't that natives won't take jobs that immigrants will. The argument is really that there are jobs that natives won't take at the going wage. That's a very different argument. In the absence of immigrants, employers will respond. And the usual response is to make a more attractive job offer. If you and I go to Cape Cod and demand a hamburger, believe me, somebody will provide it.⁸

There are a wide range of estimates regarding just how extensive the detrimental effects of wage competition have been on a national level, but realistically, this is not what most powerfully affects the views of working class Americans. It is, on the contrary, specific, real world examples like those above that influence these voters and convince them that wage competition and the degradation of job conditions are entirely and undeniably real.

(Note: it is very important to clearly distinguish the argument above from the quite distinct debate that is also going on among population demographers about the optimal size of future *legal* immigration. Many demographers, noting the declining U.S. birthrate, argue that America will actually need more immigrants in the future to sustain economic growth. For the reasons noted in the footnote below, however, this debate does not directly relate to the argument that competition from low-skill immigrants can and does adversely affect the wages and conditions of low skilled domestic workers.)⁹

⁷Politico

⁸Interview

⁹Most of the demographic projections that suggest positive effects from allowing increased legal immigration assume that the new legally admitted immigrants will be selected for those with significant skills, education and resources. Moreover, even if they are low-skilled, legally admitted immigrants cannot be exploited by employers in the way that undocumented immigrants can be. As a result, one cannot directly compare estimates and projections about the possible economic effects of future legal immigration with analyses of the economic effects that current and past undocumented immigrants have had on the wages and conditions of domestic workers.

2. Competition for Public Services

In their own daily lives most educated Americans do not usually encounter examples of competition for public services. Homeowners do not notice significant numbers of Latinos or Latinas speaking to each other in Spanish while standing on line at the city building department while they are filing a blueprint for a new house or a renovation of their home. Neither do they encounter such people when they are applying for a business license, registering a new corporation, sitting in their doctor's waiting room or visiting their children's classrooms in upscale school districts.

But the situation appears quite different to the white and African-American working class people that one listens to when one sits in dozens of focus groups or goes canvassing door to door in working class neighborhoods. One hears instead repeated stories about encountering Latinos in the lines seeking Medicaid or food stamps or disability payments or filling emergency room waiting areas or the waiting lists for public school remedial education programs for their children.

Here is one participant in a white working class focus group quoted by opinion analyst Stan Greenberg:¹⁰

"I went and finally signed up for Medicaid, and I'm standing in the damn welfare office, and I'm looking around at all of these people that can't even say hello to me in English. But they're all there with appointments for their workers, which means they have the health-care, they have the food stamps...If you can come from somewhere else, why can't we all get it? We feel getting to the American dream is hard enough and we should be at the front of the line. I'm all for everybody having the American dream, but I feel that it's being taken away from a lot of people by people coming and taking advantage."

It is easy to dismiss complaints like these as urban legends invented to conceal underlying racism, but this conviction weakens when one listens again and again to very detailed anecdotes with specific and verifiable identifying features.

A substantial University of Minnesota report, for example, reviewed a variety of studies that investigated how working class Americans reacted to immigration:¹¹

Fennelly and Leitner conducted focus groups with White working-class individuals in a rural town with a large meat packing plant. The quote in the next paragraph is from a White worker who was employed at the plant until the mid-1990's, when it shut down, the union was disbanded, and the company reopened with a workforce that was almost exclusively made up of immigrants on the processing lines.

Daniel: They shouldn't be treated better than we are. We're the ones that are payin' for what they're gittin. If they're gonna run around act like they're better than we are, we ain't gonna, we ain't gonna appreciate that at all.

¹⁰It is worth noting that the participants were not Republicans. They were whites without college degrees who had voted for Trump but identified themselves as independents, as Democratic-leaning independents, or as Democrats who voted for Obama in 2008, 2012 or both:

http://rooseveltinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Dcor_Macomb_FG-Memo_3.9.2017_v8-2.pdf

¹¹Quoted from Andrew Levison's *The White Working Class Today: Who They Are, How They Think and How Progressives Can Regain Their Support.*, chapter 6.

...In Fennelly and Leitner's study, the most strident anti-immigrant sentiments are voiced as a reaction to the perception that immigrants get special tax and social welfare breaks. In the present study, 58% of respondents overall agree with the statement that "immigrants do not pay their fair share of taxes," and 46% agree that "immigrants are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing and health care".

Surveys and focus groups conducted with suburban residents in Minnesota provide further illustration of this tendency. For example, a middle aged white woman in a suburban community expresses outrage over what she perceives as unfair advantages for immigrants:

The groups are getting very large and it seems when they come over here they are getting all the tax breaks. They get all this help. They get this, they get that..., and those of us who have fought for this country, who have paid our taxes, who raise our children and who live in this country and in this state are the ones that are paying for all those people to get all those breaks and our children and our lifestyles are not increasing, they are staying stagnant. Some are still staying at poverty level because these people who are coming into Minnesota from other countries are getting what us as Minnesotans or American citizens ought to be having.

Again, it is easy for college educated Americans to dismiss many of these complaints as simply rationalizations that conceal racial bias but this fails to recognize the deeper social process that is actually going on.

The social scientist who has most profoundly explored the psychology that underlies working class resentment of immigrants is the sociologist Arlie Hochschild. In her Book, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, she explains her findings as follows:

What the people I interviewed were drawn to was the deep story underlying [their specific experiences] an account of life as it feels to them. Some such account underlies all beliefs, right or left, I think. Their deep story goes like this:

You are patiently standing in the middle of a long line stretching toward the horizon, where the American Dream awaits. But as you wait, you see people cutting in line ahead of you. Many of these line-cutters are black—beneficiaries of affirmative action or welfare. ...Then you see immigrants, Mexicans, Somalis, the Syrian refugees yet to come. As you wait in this unmoving line, you're being asked to feel sorry for them all. You have a good heart. But who is deciding who you should feel compassion for? Then you see President Barack Hussein Obama waving the line-cutters forward. He's on their side. ...As you wait your turn, Obama is using the money in your pocket to help the line-cutters. He and his liberal backers have removed the shame from taking. The government has become an instrument for redistributing your money to the undeserving. It's not your government anymore; it's theirs.¹²

¹²<https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/08/trump-white-blue-collar-supporters/>

Stan Greenberg observed the same attitude during his extensive research among white working class Americans who voted for Donald Trump. As he concluded:

Immigration is a powerful issue for these Trump voters, representing a demand that citizens come before non-citizens, Americans before foreigners, and that we take care of home first before abroad. They believe that we have “opened up our borders, [and] pretty much made it a free for all” which means fewer jobs and greater demands on government services and more concerns about safety...Some say “I don’t really care about the wall, as long as we can get a grip on the illegal immigrant problem.” The majority felt that there are too many American citizens struggling here for us to allow more people in and not concentrate on Americans first.

Americans see many of these immigrants as honest and hard-working, but they do worry about the costs. More than 60 percent believe granting legal status would lead to greater competition for public services and more than half believe it would take jobs from American citizens. Those numbers are not driven entirely by Republicans. Indeed, 41 percent of Democrats think those immigrants would “take jobs from U.S. citizens,” and more important, half of Democrats believe granting legal status “would be a drain on government services.”¹³

Yet, at same time, the overwhelming majority of polls show that most white and African-American working people do not hate immigrants or despise them as Trump does. They do not want to deport law abiding immigrants or be brutal and heartless to refugees.

Once one understands this dichotomous way that working people feel it is easy to grasp the reason why the progressive view that dismisses their concerns as nothing more than excuses for racism strikes them as sanctimonious elitism. When Democrats seem to blithely endorse ideas like “open borders” or “abolishing the ICE” it does not sound to them like sincere humanitarianism but rather like the smug indifference of people who have the economic resources to avoid the problems less affluent people face. In fact, progressive advocacy of “open borders” actually sounds to them like a direct attack on their material interests by people above them. And in a profound sense, it is.

This is powerfully expressed by Angela Nagel in a recent, widely discussed article *“The Left Case against Open Borders”*:

The transformation of open borders into a “Left” position is a very new phenomenon and runs counter to the history of the organized Left in fundamental ways. Open borders has long been a rallying cry of the business and free market Right. Drawing from neoclassical economists, these groups have advocated for liberalizing migration on the grounds of market rationality and economic freedom. They oppose limits on migration for the same reasons that they oppose restrictions on the movement of capital. The Koch-funded Cato Institute, which also advocates lifting legal restrictions on child labor, has churned out radical open borders advocacy for decades, arguing that support for open borders is a fundamental tenet of libertarianism, and “Forget the wall already, it’s time for the U.S. to have open borders.” The Adam Smith Institute has done much the same, arguing that “Immigration restrictions make us poorer.”

¹³http://rooseveltinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Dcor_Macomb_FG-Memo_3.9.2017_v8-2.pdf

Following Reagan and figures like Milton Friedman, George W. Bush championed liberalizing migration before, during, and after his presidency. Grover Norquist, a zealous advocate of Trump's (and Bush's and Reagan's) tax cuts, has for years railed against the illiberalism of the trade unions, reminding us, "Hostility to immigration has traditionally been a union cause."

He's not wrong. From the first law restricting immigration in 1882 to Cesar Chavez and the famously multiethnic United Farm Workers protesting against employers' use and encouragement of illegal migration in 1969, trade unions have often opposed mass migration. They saw the deliberate importation of illegal, low-wage workers as weakening labor's bargaining power and as a form of exploitation.

She continues, questioning the perspective of the Left today:

...The Left, meanwhile, seems to have no option but to recoil in horror at Trump's "Muslim ban" and news stories about ICE hunting down migrant families; it can only react against whatever Trump is doing. If Trump is for immigration controls, then the Left will demand the opposite. And so today talk of "open borders" has entered mainstream liberal discourse, where once it was confined to radical free market think tanks and libertarian anarchist circles.

During the 2016 Democratic primary campaign, when Vox editor Ezra Klein suggested open borders policies to Bernie Sanders, the senator famously showed his vintage when he replied, "Open borders? No. That's a Koch Brothers proposal." This momentarily confused the official narrative, and Sanders was quickly accused of "sounding like Donald Trump." Beneath the generational differences revealed in this exchange, however, is a larger issue. The destruction and abandonment of labor politics means that, at present, immigration issues can only play out within the framework of a culture war, fought entirely on moral grounds. In the heightened emotions of America's public debate on migration, a simple moral and political dichotomy prevails. It is "right-wing" to be "against immigration" and "left-wing" to be "for immigration." But the economics of migration tell a very different story.¹⁴

But what is the alternative? Progressives and Democrats, including the trade unions in the AFL-CIO, are fundamentally and entirely correctly committed to creating a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants who have lived here for years as law-abiding citizens and they also support as a matter of basic moral principle humane treatment for those who arrive at the border. But in what other ways can these forces present a perspective that working Americans will recognize as genuinely reflecting their interests and supporting their values?

There are three main concepts that can be offered: concepts that are anchored in common sense.

1. Immigration laws and penalties should be directed at employers, not workers

A man or woman who simply takes a job should not be viewed and treated as a criminal. An employer who knowingly hires undocumented workers in order to pay them less and provide worse conditions on the other hand, is doing something that is morally and socially wrong. Right now when the ICE raids a factory or restaurant, it is the workers who are arrested and

¹⁴<https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2018/11/the-left-case-against-open-borders/>

treated like criminals while the employers escape with, at most, minor fines. This is profoundly unfair. If the goal is to remove the incentives for business to use “illegal” aliens rather than American citizens, the brunt of legal sanctions and penalties should be directed at the employer not the employee.

2. The border cannot be left wide open for anyone to enter. But the question is not if the border should be controlled, but rather what is the right way to do it.

It is reasonable to feel sympathy for individual refugees, especially women and children, but the inescapable fact is that America simply cannot absorb all the people who would like to immigrate to the U.S. Although immigration from Mexico actually stabilized and began to decline over a decade ago, there are 30 million people in just the three Central American nations of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador and close to 50 million in Central America (excluding Mexico) as a whole. Millions barely scratch an existence from subsistence agriculture and vast numbers would gladly come to America. It is not possible to rapidly absorb all these potential immigrants without significantly undermining the wages and working conditions of many American workers and placing unsustainable demands on public services.

At the present time there is a compelling case for approving the maximum possible number of asylum requests for those migrants who are currently fleeing murderous gang violence in some urban areas in these countries. In the long run, however, this is not a sustainable solution for the vastly larger number of potential migrants who dream of America as an escape from rural and urban poverty.

Investing five billion dollars in Trump’s proposed wall will do little or nothing to stop this migrant flow. On the other hand, using that same money—not to mention the 20 billion dollars Trump at one time proposed¹⁵—could have a very significant effect if used to develop a regional plan in coordination with Mexico and the Central American countries to control and humanely manage the flow of refugees from the time they enter Mexico and also to make it economically viable for as many as possible to remain in their own homes and communities. The new president of Mexico has already declared his government’s support for an integrated regional approach of this kind and discussions are already underway. It is this kind of approach and not a futile, entirely symbolic wall that should be supported.¹⁶

3. Meeting the needs of Americans must come before meeting the needs of people coming to our borders. This is not just a matter of politics; it is a matter of basic fairness and justice.

This goes to the heart of the “deep story” described by Arlie Hochschild. White working people are compassionate but they do not consider themselves affluent or accept that immigrants from other countries should automatically have the same rights as citizens. To them, progressive and Democratic indifference to their needs, rights and interests violates basic concepts of fairness and justice.

¹⁵<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/18/us/politics/trump-border-wall-immigration.html>

¹⁶<https://www.thenation.com/article/mexico-lopez-obrador-amlo-migrants-immigration-policy/>

Greenberg explains that, as working people perceive it:

The Democrats have moved from seeking to manage and champion the nation's growing immigrant diversity to seeming to champion immigrant rights over American citizens'. Instinctively and not surprisingly, the Democrats embraced the liberal values of America's dynamic and best-educated metropolitan areas, seeming not to respect the values or economic stress of voters in working class, small-town and rural America.¹⁷

Greenberg's polling data, confirmed by other opinion surveys, indicates that there is a significant and politically pivotal group of working people who will accept the basic Democratic goal of providing a path to citizenship for the millions of undocumented immigrants if it is done in a way that does not place their needs and interests ahead of American citizens.

One working class woman in a focus group put it as follows:

"In America we have hungry, we have veterans, we have mental illness, we have so many problems in our own country that we at this point in time just can't be concerned with, I feel bad but...our country's in dire straits financially." "I mean we need to take care of home first. We need to take care of the veterans, we need to take care of the elderly, we need to take care of the mentally ill, we need to take care everyone instead of us worrying about other people in other countries, we need to take care of our house first. Get our house in order and then we'll help you."¹⁸

This is not the statement of a racist who hates brown skinned people because of the color of their skin as Trump clearly does—and it is not the statement of someone who is simply rationalizing her prejudice by imagining nonexistent affronts and injustices.

On the contrary, this is the statement of someone who will listen to Democrats if they show that they understand her concerns and will respect her point of view. It is the statement of someone who can be convinced to vote for Democrats if they demonstrate that they will genuinely represent her.

¹⁷<https://prospect.org/article/democrats%E2%80%99-%E2%80%98working-class-problem%E2%80%99>

¹⁸Ibid.