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A Decade Ago, Trump Set an Immigration Trap and Democrats Still Haven't Escaped

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Ten years ago today, on August 31, 2016, Donald Trump delivered the defining policy speech of his first presidential campaign. The speech laid out a hardline, 10-point immigration plan that energized his base. But its most enduring consequence was not the plan itself—it was the political trap it set for Democrats—one they have been caught in ever since.

Trump reframed the immigration debate around a single, blunt question: Who is immigration policy supposed to serve?

His answer was simple: Americans. Democrats, he argued, put everyone else first: undocumented immigrants, donors, activists, and special interests.

The speech, written by then-speechwriter Stephen Miller, was cruel and dishonest. But its frame was politically potent. What draws many who voted for Trump isn't the cruelty; it's the very democratic promise that immigration policy will serve Americans.

And Democrats have consistently let Trump own that promise.

The cruelty and recklessness of Trump's immigration agenda have given Democrats ample room to oppose him on moral and legal grounds. But by mostly arguing on behalf of the rights and dignity of immigrants, Democrats have too often failed to clearly articulate how their approach benefits Americans.

For example, in the summer of 2018, when the Trump Administration tore parents away from their children at the southern border, Democrats were unified in their strong opposition to the Administration's actions. But Democrats also failed to move beyond critiques and offer a durable alternative for how families should be processed quickly and fairly, how the system should distinguish valid claims from invalid ones, what consequences should follow for those who do not qualify to stay, and how the border should be managed overall. Instead, the party's loudest immigration debate veered toward abolishing Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The public heard Democrats' opposition to Trump's enforcement model, but no coherent alternative.

The 2020 Democratic primary reinforced this vulnerability. Candidates infamously raised their hands in support of decriminalizing illegal border crossings and providing health coverage to undocumented immigrants. Elizabeth Warren, when asked specifically about immigration violations, demurred from even mentioning enforcement. Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders both definitively said that local police should not turn arrested undocumented immigrants over to immigration enforcement.

Each example has nuance and defensible policy arguments behind it. But politics is often the art of what voters hear. And what many heard was a party strongly advocating for undocumented immigrants and failing to clearly explain what Americans would gain.

Under President Biden, the problem deepened. Record arrivals at the southern border strained an already broken system. Cities near and far from the border were left scrambling to shelter and support new arrivals without adequate planning, funding, or federal coordination. Local leaders faced pressure on shelters, schools, budgets, and basic public services.

For many voters, the crisis called into question not just whether Democrats cared about the effects of immigration on Americans, but whether they could competently govern through them.

The 2024 election showed the political wreckage. In post-election polling commissioned by Third Way, persuadable voters—those who said they considered voting for both Harris and Trump—trusted Trump over Harris on border security by a staggering 86% to 13%. Even voters overall said they trusted Trump more than Harris on border security by 60% to 39%.

Even now, with Trump’s second-term immigration agenda defined by overreach and chaos, Democrats have not escaped the trap he set. In polling commissioned by Third Way and UnidosUS, voters still trusted Republicans more than Democrats on immigration, 43% to 37%, and approved of President Trump’s job on border security.

Democrats should not confuse the power of Trump’s political framing with policy success. He may have promised to target the “worst of the worst” and free up jobs for Americans, but his mass deportation strategy has led to the fatal shooting and wrongful detention of US citizens, disruptions to key industries, and backlogs that leave families, workers, and even medical professionals in legal limbo.

To compete, Democrats do not need to mimic Trump. But they do need to beat his frame.

That starts with a sentence Democrats should not be afraid to say: Immigration policy must work for Americans. This is not anti-immigrant. It is fundamentally democratic.

An immigration policy that is not centered around improving the well-being of citizens and the nation is not politically sustainable. And, as we’ve seen, without public support, even the most humane and humanitarian policies become fragile.

Democrats can offer a vision for an immigration system that sincerely works for Americans. Such a system would maintain a controlled border; use smarter interior enforcement to target genuine threats to public safety and the integrity of the system; pair due process with real consequences for those who do not qualify to stay; support communities absorbing new arrivals; and manage a legal immigration system that is faster, more credible, and more clearly tied to the country’s workforce needs, family commitments, and the national interest.

As they lay out that vision, Democrats must balance talk about undocumented immigrants with discussion of what a functioning immigration system delivers for Americans: safer borders and communities; a more responsive, protected, and reliable workforce; a stronger economy; and a level playing field and increased opportunities for all.

Trump set the terms of this debate nearly a decade ago. Democrats do not have to accept his answer. But they do have to answer his question.

Who is the immigration system for?

It is for the American people.
