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Don't Raise Your Hand, Raise Your Game: The 2028 Primaries Will Define the Democrats' Next Immigration Agenda

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Democrats have a rare opportunity to redefine their party's approach to immigration. In recent years, voters have lived through failures from both parties: a border overwhelmed under Joe Biden and an enforcement system out of control under Donald Trump. Democrats have made clear they won't repeat either. But they have yet to say what comes next.

Ready or not, that debate is about to begin. The 2028 presidential primaries will force candidates to answer questions the party has largely avoided—and their answers will define the Democratic brand on immigration for years to come.

The last time this happened, in 2019, Democrats stumbled into positions that haunted them through the 2024 election. The stakes are at least as high this time. So is the opportunity to offer voters something neither party has delivered: an immigration system that combines order, accountability, and opportunity.

The Debate Starts the Morning After the Midterms

The midterm votes will barely be counted before 2028 hopefuls start declaring. The field will be crowded and candidates will be under heavy pressure to stand out.

Immigration may be where candidates have the most opportunity to distinguish themselves because the Democratic Party has yet to tell voters what it is for.

Instead, Democrats have spent two years explaining what they are against: Biden lost control of the border; Trump's response is cruel, chaotic, and lawless. As a critique, it works.

But “not Biden and not Trump” is not an immigration policy. Voters will want to know what immigration would look like under the next Democratic president. What would they keep? What would they change? How would they maintain control of the border while restoring a functional legal immigration system? How would they enforce the law without the chaos and cruelty of the Trump years?

Candidates will have to answer them, for better or worse, early on in the presidential primary season. And the last time a Democratic primary defined the party on immigration, it was a disaster.

The Ghost of 2019

In 2019, outrage at Trump's family separations, and activist energy that followed, convinced many Democrats that voters had moved decisively to the left.

They hadn't. On a debate stage that June, candidates were asked whether they would decriminalize border crossings and whether their health plans would cover undocumented immigrants. Most raised their hands on the first question. All ten raised them on the second.

Whatever nuance lay behind those moments did not survive the week. Trump tweeted that “all Democrats just raised their hands for giving millions of illegal aliens unlimited healthcare.” His campaign cut an ad from the footage: “They're all the same.” In one night, the party acquired a new immigration position without any real debate about who gets in, who doesn't, and how to make it work.

In 2024, Trump was still using Kamala Harris's 2019 hand raise and her ACLU questionnaire pledges as proof she wanted open borders. His campaign built his “Kamala is for they/them” ad on that same questionnaire. Weeks before the election,

she spent much of her high-profile interview with Fox News's Bret Baier answering for positions she had taken in the 2019 primary.

The bill came due. With the border surge layered on top, voters who named immigration their top issue backed Trump 89% to 9%. Months after the election, Democrats still faced a 30-point trust deficit on immigration.

A hand raised for five seconds can become a party brand for five years.

The lesson is not just to watch what you say and where your hands go. It is that a primary can define a party's position on an issue even when that position has never been seriously debated, much less embraced by the voters Democrats need to win.

This Time Will Be Worse

There is every reason to believe Democratic immigration positions will face even more scrutiny in 2028 than in 2019. The party is again under pressure to respond to the Trump Administration's chaos and cruelty, but having disavowed the Biden record, it is working from a nearly blank slate. Candidates will be writing new playbooks, and critics on the left and the right will be waiting.

For a preview, look at August, when the DNC approved dueling resolutions, one to reform ICE and one urging Congress to abolish it. The vote was nonbinding. Republicans didn't care. Conservative commentator Scott Jennings gleefully predicted that on abolishing ICE, "every 2028 presidential candidate is going to have to take that position. This primary of trying to outdo each other's crazy positions will be a sight to behold."

Abolish ICE is the new Defund the Police. The outrage behind it is real and justified, but as a governing position, it's a gift to Republicans. In Third Way's new presidential battleground poll with Normington Petts, six in ten voters want major change at ICE, but only 27% want it abolished. 51% of Democrats favor abolition, but just 28% of Independents do. It is the 2019 trap in a single cross-tab.

The forces behind that divide are easy to understand. After years of watching Trump's enforcement operations tear apart families and communities, Democratic primary

voters are angry, and activists will demand a response to match. Candidates competing in a crowded field for attention, endorsements, donations, and votes will face enormous pressure to prove that they are the most committed to undoing Trump's immigration agenda.

But a presidential primary is not just a contest for the Democratic nomination. It is also a national stage on which candidates speak for the Democratic Party as a whole. Positions that resonate with an activist audience can quickly become liabilities with a general-election electorate that wants both immigration enforcement and humane treatment. And while there is nuance behind the interest in abolishing ICE, for voters worried Democrats won't enforce immigration laws, the slogan confirms their fears.

An even bigger danger may be the paperwork. Harris's most damaging pledges came from a written questionnaire, not a hand raise. Within months, questionnaires will land on candidates' desks. Every box checked is a potential attack ad in the general election. And every podcast, livestream, and town hall will be clipped, too. Expect an answer given in the heat of a 2027 primary debate to be played back in October 2028.

Democratic voters are right to demand clear positions on immigration. The problem is that Democrats have not yet built a coherent governing vision it can defend under pressure. And the question are predictable:

Should ICE be abolished? Voters distinguish between ending enforcement and ending its abuses. Candidates can propose overhauling ICE to meet the widely supported standards of the best local police departments (visible IDs, body cameras, independent oversight, and a focus on serious criminals and recent crossers), or they can let the primary become a contest over who will go furthest.

Will you keep the border closed? Admitting that Biden got the border wrong is easy. Explaining how to prevent another surge while protecting refugees is not. One answer: expand safe, legal ways to seek protection from abroad, so fewer people feel they have to come to the border.

Should undocumented immigrants get government health coverage? The defining question of 2019 could easily return. Current law says no, except for emergency care, while permanent residents can buy subsidized plans on the ACA exchanges and, after five years, qualify for Medicaid. Candidates can promise to restore the coverage Trump

stripped from DACA recipients, refugees, and asylees. Letting undocumented immigrants buy in at their own expense could even lower premiums, but candidates should never offer them more than green-card holders get.

Do you support sanctuary cities? The question forces a false choice that obscures the real public safety issues. A workable answer ensures cooperation when serious criminals are involved, protects local police from being commandeered into federal enforcement, and makes Washington a partner rather than a bully.

Should those wrongfully deported under Trump be allowed to return? With even US citizens caught up in this Administration's reckless removals, candidates will need a plan. The answer that won't confirm voters' fears rests on due process: people whose rights were violated and have a valid claim under current law can apply to return.

Will you reverse every Trump immigration policy on day one? Undoing Trump's excesses doesn't require returning to the conditions that produced the Biden-era crisis. Candidates will need to explain how they would secure the border, reform asylum processes, rebuild refugee admissions, restore legal immigration, and end indiscriminate deportations without inviting another surge.

These are not obscure policy disputes. Each could define what voters believe Democrats stand for. Each could force a choice between a politically attractive primary answer and a durable governing position. And each presents an opportunity for candidates to show voters that Democrats have learned from the failures of both administrations.

The question is whether the primaries will produce a serious debate about those choices or another set of pledges that Republicans can exploit for years.

An Opportunity Democrats Have Not Had in Years

For all these dangers, the moment is also ripe. Border crossings are at historic lows, 58% of battleground voters disapprove of Trump's enforcement, and 75% of Americans back a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants who meet certain requirements. And by gutting legal immigration, Trump has made rebuilding it a cause Democrats can own.

Voters are clamoring for strong, accountable enforcement alongside expansive legal pathways and a path to citizenship for longtime undocumented immigrants who are Americans in all but paperwork. Order is not the opposite of generosity; it is what makes generosity politically possible.

Democrats have a steep hill to climb on trust. For many voters, immigration is a litmus test: before they will consider a Democrat, they need to believe the party will enforce the law. Vagueness and platitudes don't neutralize that question. They answer it badly.

The stakes go beyond the election. The next Democratic president will inherit a badly damaged immigration system, and fixing it will take public trust. If the primaries pull the party toward positions voters don't share, Republicans will walk into 2028 with a ready-made attack that may continue to work for years to come. If instead Democrats take this opportunity and produce an agenda that pairs order with generosity, the nominee can compete on immigration instead of hiding from it.

The next Democratic primary will define the party on immigration. The question is whether it does so by accident, as in 2019, or through a serious debate about how to finally get immigration right.



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