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Memo to Democrats on Immigration: To Turbocharge Generosity, Get Order Right

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Heading into the 2028 presidential race, Democrats will not win the immigration debate simply by denouncing Trump's cruelty. They must persuade voters that they can maintain order at the border and manage the immigration system competently. Without that trust, Democrats will not only struggle to win back the White House, but they will also be unable to build the durable public support needed to enact long-overdue reforms.

The politics—though counterintuitive to maximalists on both the left and right—are straightforward: when voters are confident the government has control of the border, they become more open to generous legal pathways for undocumented immigrants already settled in the United States and for legal immigrants and refugees applying from abroad. Order is not the opposite of generosity; it is what makes generosity politically possible.

Regaining voters' confidence is a high bar. Most voters believe the Biden Administration allowed the border to get out of control, and Republicans will continue to reinforce that perception. At the same time, the debate tends to be dominated by absolutist voices on both flanks. On the right, many call for mass deportation and sharp cuts to legal immigration. On the left, some call for dismantling enforcement altogether. Most Americans reject both.

The opportunity for Democrats is to offer a more compelling synthesis: establish clear and credible control, then expand lawful, orderly, and manageable pathways. By mastering the balance between order and generosity, Democrats will be able to shift from defense to offense and build a majority immigration agenda that is humane, credible, and politically sustainable.

What Left and Right Get Wrong on Immigration

To most voters, a binary approach—let everyone in or keep everyone out—defies common sense. They see order and generosity as complementary. The United States, as a sovereign nation, should decide who enters through a lawful, orderly, and humane system, admitting needed workers, reuniting close family members, and selecting refugees through a regulated system that reflects our values and grows our economy.

In fact, both polling and other research show that when voters have confidence the immigration system is controlled, they are more supportive of policies that welcome immigrants.

This “both/and” formulation may sound contradictory to some, but to most voters, a forced choice between order and generosity is a false one. Demands for control are not inherently xenophobic; more often, they reflect a basic expectation that government should

competently manage a complex system. Treating all demands for control as hostile to immigrants alienates persuadable voters.

In recent years, neither party has gotten this balance right. The Biden administration was viewed as offering compassion without control; the Trump administration is viewed as offering control without compassion. Both have led to chaos and backlash.

Under Biden, a post-pandemic surge overwhelmed the asylum system, leading to record levels of border encounters—averaging two million per year for the first three years. Images of disorder reinforced a perception of drift and indifference, leading many voters to conclude that the Administration was not serious about enforcement or maintaining order at the border.

In its last year, the Biden Administration implemented a more balanced strategy—tightening asylum rules, expanding legal pathways, increasing removals, and coordinating with regional partners—and Border Patrol encounters fell sharply: from a record 249,785 in December 2023 to 47,330 in December 2024, a reduction of 81%. But the political damage was already done. Even after Trump blocked a bipartisan border bill, voters were unmoved. The “open borders” label stuck to Democrats, with many voters viewing Trump as more credible on enforcing our immigration laws.

Third Way’s post-election survey with Global Strategy Group found that in presidential battleground states, voters trusted Trump over Harris on border security 60% to 39%—a 21-point gap. The gap was much larger among persuadable voters, who trusted Trump over Harris on border security 86% to 13%. Immigration was Trump’s strongest issue and Harris’s weakest.

Now, however, Trump and Republicans are getting it wrong. While voters want effective enforcement, they oppose rampant cruelty. Highly visible enforcement actions—masked agents, aggressive tactics, large-scale detention camps, and the killing of citizens—are fueling concerns that Trump’s mass deportation strategy is chaotic, excessive, and unaccountable.

Recent polling from Third Way and UnidosUS captures the public backlash: declining support for Trump’s enforcement approach (with ICE in American cities viewed negatively by likely voters 57% to 41%); an even stronger negative reaction by Hispanic voters (69% to 30%); strong backing for guardrails and reforms (80% and above for the top four options); and opposition to funding ICE without meaningful guardrails (57% for all voters; 81% for Hispanic voters).

Democrats have found their voice, are speaking out against these excesses, and have advocated for measured guardrails on enforcement. This may be enough for the 2026

midterms. But looking ahead to 2028, a central question remains: how will Democrats deliver order without a return to the chaos of the Biden years?

The Key to Unlocking Majority Support is Hiding in Plain Sight

The most important—and underappreciated—fact in this debate is that support for generous immigration policies rises when voters believe the border is under control. The evidence is consistent and compelling.

- As border crossings declined dramatically from 2024 to 2025, [Gallup found](#) that support for immigration increased sharply. In 2025:
 - A record 79% said immigration is a good thing for the country, up 15% from the year before.
 - Support for a pathway to citizenship rose to 78%, including a 15% increase among Republicans.
 - The share of Americans who want immigration reduced fell from 55% in 2024 to 30%.
- After the 2024 election, [More in Common](#) asked voters to choose among four options: enforcement only, legal pathways only, both, or neither.
 - 51% prefer a combination of stronger borders and more legal pathways for immigration.
 - 22% support legal pathways only.
 - 18% support border enforcement only.
 - 9% chose none of the above.
- In 2025, [More in Common](#) asked whether control or numbers mattered more:
 - 59% say controlling who can and cannot migrate is the priority.
 - 29% say reducing the number of people who migrate here is the priority.
 - 12% say increasing the number of people who migrate here is the priority.
- In June 2025, in [message tests by Global Strategy Group for Navigator](#), a balanced immigration message outperformed a Republican mass deportation message by 66% to 25%.
 - The winning message: “A balanced approach that fixes our broken immigration system by focusing on deporting those who have committed serious crime, while

still upholding American values like treating people humanely and ensuring due process as protected in the Constitution. This approach would also allow immigrants who have been working, paying taxes and following the law to apply for legal status.”

- In [message testing conducted by Third Way and Normington Petts](#) in March 2025, “order at the border” messaging significantly outperformed both Trump’s approach and standard Democratic messaging. It also performed better with Democratic base voters, who preferred the “order” message over typical Democratic messaging, 79% to 55%.

Academic research helps explain why. A [study published in 2024](#) used three survey experiments to test how Americans’ immigration preferences shift with perceptions of border security. Across all three, support for higher levels of immigration increased when respondents believed the border was secure. The core dynamic is straightforward: when voters believe the system is under control, they become more open to immigration.

What This Means for Democrats

The evidence is clear: an America confident in its ability to manage its borders is an America willing to be more welcoming. With Republicans leaning into hardline policies, Democrats have an opening to restore credibility with a clear order-plus-generosity agenda aligned with majority opinion.

History reinforces the point. Comprehensive immigration reform—combining strong enforcement with legalization and expanded legal pathways—once commanded majority public and significant bipartisan backing. But as [pollster Stanley Greenberg noted](#), that support depended on confidence that border control would be taken seriously. Without it, the perception and fear of “open borders” fills the vacuum.

This is not a call to recycle old proposals. It is a call for Democrats to articulate a fresh agenda grounded in widely shared interests and values. Most Americans believe immigration benefits the country and are open to more generous policies—but that openness is conditional. It grows when enforcement is seen as effective and fair, and it erodes when the system appears chaotic or unaccountable.

If the United States is to remain both a nation of immigrants and a nation of laws, the surest way to be either is to be both. It’s on Democrats to own and articulate that approach.

