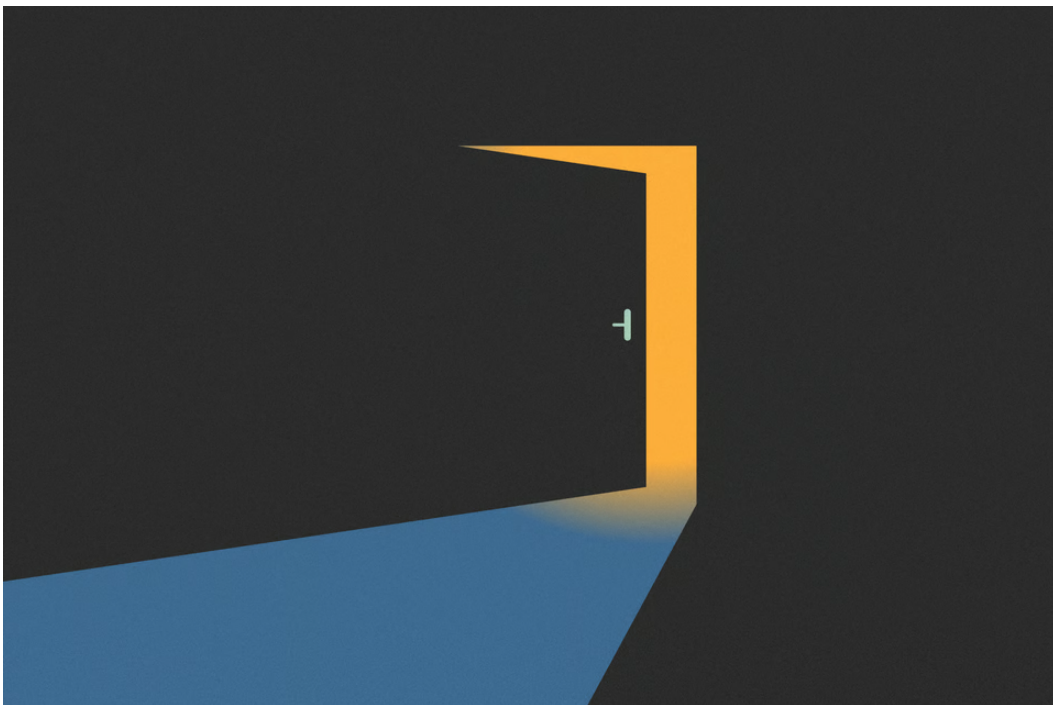


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Order is the Price of Admission

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Four democracies found answers to one of immigration's hardest political puzzles and pushed the far right to the margins. Three of the West's biggest powers fell short. The difference was not how many people they admitted, but whether voters believed the government was in control.

How does a center-left government win back public trust on immigration in an era when the far right has learned to convert migration anxiety into electoral fuel?

Last week, Spain's approach to immigration faced the ultimate stress test. Tens of thousands of people crossed from Morocco into Ceuta, a Spanish city of just 85,000, producing scenes of genuine chaos and a serious breach of the country's border.

President Trump and his allies immediately declared vindication. Trump called the crossings an "invasion," blamed Spain's "very progressive" laws, and said the country did not know how to respond. His State Department went further, claiming the crisis was the direct result of Spain's efforts to facilitate mass illegal migration. Vice President JD Vance and senior White House officials held up the images as proof that pro-immigration governments inevitably endanger their own countries.

Their read, however, is exactly backward.

The test of a government's immigration policy is not whether anyone ever breaches its borders. It is whether, when that breach comes, the government can restore control without surrendering either its authority or its principles. Spain did just this.

Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez did not minimize what had happened. He condemned the breach as a violation of Spain's territorial integrity, deployed the military alongside additional police, coordinated with Morocco to prevent further crossings, and moved quickly to return those without permission to remain. By Friday afternoon, Spanish authorities said the vast majority had already returned to Morocco.

But Sánchez also refused the far right's invitation to treat the crisis as an indictment of immigration itself. Spain did not describe migrants as an invading army, abandon its support for legal migration, or retreat from the integration and regularization policies upon which its economy depends. It treated irregular migration as a problem of border control and state capacity—not as proof that immigrants are the problem.

This was a center-left immigration agenda passing the test under maximum pressure: responding forcefully, visibly, and without apology; refusing the invasion frame; and continuing to make the case for legal immigration. It was a real-time demonstration that order and control are what keep generosity politically possible.

The United States has recently shown how quickly public opinion can respond when control becomes visible. In a single year, after the chaos at America's southern border was visibly brought to heel, the share of Americans who wanted immigration reduced fell from 55% to 30%. The share calling immigration "a good thing" hit a record 79%. And support for a pathway to citizenship rose to 78%—with a 13-point jump among Republicans.

The country didn't suddenly fall in love with immigration. It stopped feeling as though the system was out of control.

That is the pattern across the democratic world. The countries that keep immigration from consuming their politics are not the ones that admit the fewest people. They are the ones whose voters believe the government is deciding who enters legally, who is turned back or removed, and how newcomers are integrated.

The question is who's in charge, not simply how many get in. Order is the price of admission: establish it, and generosity becomes politically possible. Fail to establish it, and you lose public consent, including for the immigrants you are trying to protect.

The pattern rests on three linked commitments.

- Successful center-left governments distinguish legal immigration from irregular migration—defending the former while visibly managing the latter.
- They compete on competent government—not on culture-war arguments about who the immigrants are. They deliver the control voters doubt they can, letting results—not rhetoric—carry the argument.
- They take ownership of immigration enforcement rather than ceding it to the right—because a party seen as merely tolerating restrictions gets none of the credit when they work, and all the blame when they fail.

Four center-left governments—Australia, Spain, Canada, and Denmark—have managed large-scale immigration without surrendering to the populist right. Three of the West's largest powers—the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany—let immigration fracture their center-left governments and strengthen far-right forces.

The dividing line between them was not the number of immigrants who came in. It was whether the government could make control over irregular migration both real and believed.

Spain runs one of the highest per-capita immigration rates in the developed world, yet its hard-right party has stalled. Australia's foreign-born share is nearly twice that of the United States, and its center-left just won in a landslide. If immigration levels alone drove the

backlash, these would be the hardest-hit cases. The far right is gaining ground in both, but it has not broken either country's politics.

Building public confidence in immigration control is a test of delivery and perception—and is much harder than simply proclaiming control. Control that is real but not believed still loses. That is the story of the three countries that fell short.

A note of caution: these are not clean victories, and the ground is still shifting. And while migration is among the most salient issues in many democracies, it is rarely the only force shaping a government's fate—the economy, personalities, coalition math, and scandal all play a role. The lessons that follow are therefore meaningful—but provisional.

Two Tracks, Not One

Successful countries refuse to treat immigration as a single, undifferentiated issue. They run two tracks, and keep them visibly separate.

The first is legal immigration, focused heavily on the workers the economy needs. Generosity makes sense here because the demographic case is overwhelming: aging populations, shrinking workforces, and unfilled jobs. The second track is irregular migration—illegal entry and asylum arrivals the government did not choose and cannot predict. Here, the public wants order and consequences, not excuses.

Australia

Australia runs the two-track system at scale. It pairs near-zero irregular maritime arrivals—the product of a hard-nosed interception program, Operation Sovereign Borders—with one of the world's largest and most skill-selective permanent migration programs. The doctrine dates to 2001, when conservative Prime Minister John Howard, while turning back a boat carrying asylum seekers, declared: "We are a generous, open-hearted people...but we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come."

The Labor Party fought that position for a decade, then adopted it wholesale—reopening offshore processing in 2012 and endorsing boat turnbacks by 2015. Once both parties owned control, "the boats" lost their power as a political weapon. That stability created room for greater generosity. After remaining near 13,750 visas through the 2000s and 2010s, Australia's Humanitarian Program was increased to 20,000 visas a year once the issue lost its political charge.

The electoral proof came in May 2025, when the conservative coalition's Peter Dutton campaigned heavily on cutting permanent immigration by 25%. It backfired. In a country

where 85% told the Scanlon Foundation in 2024 that multiculturalism has been good for Australia, Anthony Albanese's Labor won the largest majority in Australian history. Dutton became the first opposition leader ever to lose his own seat.

Even that consensus is now under strain. After the December 2025 Bondi Beach shooting, support surged for the anti-immigration One Nation party, which has since rivalled Labor in national polls. Labor's 2025 victory was real—but the consensus that made it possible may not hold.

Spain

Spain makes the economic case for immigration—and makes it loudly. As Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez told Parliament in 2024, "Spain needs to choose between being an open and prosperous country or a closed-off, poor country."

The logic is simple. Spain is aging. Its workforce is shrinking. Immigrants fill jobs, pay into the pension system, and keep the economy growing. Nearly one in five people living in Spain is now foreign-born.

Sánchez's Socialist Workers Party pairs work-based legal channels and legalization programs with strict measures to deter boat arrivals, including visas-for-cooperation deals with Morocco and Senegal. Of the migrants who reached Spain over the past decade, 94% arrived legally. Order at the border and generosity inside it.

Vox, the hard-right party, is gaining ground—performing strongly in regional contests and positioning itself as a possible partner in a future conservative government. But it has not yet broken the national consensus. For now, the far right is contained, not conquered.

Spain's model has a harder edge that must be acknowledged: much of its "control" depends on enforcement outsourced to partners with poor human rights records. For example, the decline in Atlantic-route arrivals in 2025 coincided with Mauritania expelling tens of thousands of people, many of them Malians and Senegalese, alongside interceptions and pushbacks flagged by United Nations agencies and human rights groups. The legal channels are genuine. The deterrence paired with them is not always humane.

The fragility of that bargain was on display in late July 2026, when between 50,000 and 60,000 people crossed into Ceuta in roughly 48 hours after a Spanish Supreme Court ruling limited summary returns at sea and, by most credible accounts, Moroccan security forces briefly stood down. Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez called it an "attack" on Spain's territorial integrity, deployed the army in a logistical and surveillance role, with the Guardia Civil doing the actual policing, and pushed for accelerated returns coordinated with Moroccan officials.

The response worked faster than most observers expected: within two days of the breach, police sources said roughly 53,000 of those who crossed had already returned to Morocco, and Foreign Minister José Albares said "practically the entirety" had gone back. No one moved on to mainland Spain or the rest of the EU. Even so, the human cost was severe: at least 67 died in drownings and a breakwater stampede.

The episode is a reminder that Spain's legal-labor-plus-asylum-firewall model depends on cooperation from a foreign government the Spanish state does not fully control—and that even a competent center-left administration can be knocked back on its heels when that cooperation is withdrawn. It is also a stress test that Sánchez has, in the early days, met the way this memo recommends: by owning the control agenda rather than ceding it to the far right in Spain and beyond, and by translating the shock into a legal and physical fix rather than into rhetoric.

The Ceuta breach was not caused by a bad ruling but by a misread one. The Supreme Court's narrow July 8 decision required that sea arrivals go through the ordinary return procedure, which still ends in deportation to Morocco, often within days. The court even invited Spain to install physical maritime barriers to bring sea crossings back into the summary regime. But smugglers marketed the ruling as "sea arrivals can't be deported." Sánchez's answer, announced within days of the breach, was a 500-meter sea barrier extending the breakwater—closing the gap between a legally correct ruling and an executive that had not yet built the machinery to enforce it.

Canada

For Canada, immigration isn't merely a policy lever. It's the country's growth model. With an aging population and a vast, sparsely populated country, the strategy has long been simple: grow the workforce by growing the population. For decades, all three major parties have largely agreed—orderly, selective immigration as a pillar of growth, not a wedge.

Canada also has an easier hand on asylum. Flanked by oceans and bordered only by the United States, it faces no equivalent of the Mediterranean or English Channel. Its Safe Third Country Agreement with Washington—tightened in 2023 to curb irregular crossings, while adding 15,000 humanitarian places for the Western Hemisphere—allows Canada to return most irregular claimants to the United States. When boats did test the system, as two ships carrying Tamil migrants did in 2009 and 2010, Ottawa answered firmly, and no lasting maritime route took hold.

Canada instead relies heavily on refugee resettlement. Through one of the world's largest resettlement programs—it resettled more than 51,000 refugees from abroad in 2023—Ottawa selects who arrives and screens them overseas, pairing a government-run stream

with a private-sponsorship model that lets ordinary Canadians sponsor refugee families directly. Generosity, but on the government's terms.

The consensus in favor of legal immigration came under strain in 2024, when a surge of temporary residents outpaced the housing supply and the share of voters saying there was "too much" immigration doubled in two years. The governing Liberals didn't wait to be punished. They owned the problem, cut permanent-resident targets by a fifth, and capped temporary visas.

The fix wasn't fully believed—most Canadians still told pollsters the numbers were too high—but it drained the issue of its urgency. When Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre tried to campaign on immigration in 2025, the attack landed softly. The Liberals had already moved, Trump's tariff threats had reframed the election, and Mark Carney's Liberals won the popular vote. The consensus bent; it didn't snap.

Denmark

Denmark is the hardest case to interpret. Mette Frederiksen's Social Democrats have imposed the most restrictive asylum regime in Western Europe, arguing restriction is necessary to sustain a generous welfare state. The hard line extends beyond asylum numbers into culture: laws to break up immigrant-majority "parallel society" neighborhoods; a handshake requirement for citizenship, widely understood as targeting conservative Muslims who decline to touch members of the opposite sex; and tighter rules on family reunification.

Denmark has become an immigrant nation, with immigrants and their descendants making up about 16 percent of the population. On top of that, the Social Democrats are liberalizing labor migration. The evidence of the shift is stark: of the residence permits Denmark granted in 2025, work permits outnumbered asylum grants by more than tenfold, and the number of foreign residents in Denmark for work nearly doubled over a decade, to about 187,000. The 2025 reform was negotiated through the unions, which secured collective-bargaining protections. That allowed labor migration to be presented as protecting Danish workers, not undercutting them.

After Frederiksen took ownership of asylum policy in 2019, the payoff was real: support for the anti-immigrant Danish People's Party collapsed from 21% to 8.7%.

More recently, Denmark showed you can win the immigration argument and still lose ground. In a March 2026 election, the Social Democrats fell to 21.9%—their worst result since 1903—as Frederiksen's coalition was squeezed from both sides. On the left, voters who recoiled from the cultural crackdown defected to the Greens, who captured the mayor's

office in Copenhagen—a stronghold of the Social Democrats for generations. On the right, the far-right Danish People's Party roughly tripled its support, gaining but remaining marginal. Most of the broader defection, however, reflected anger over the cost of living and the welfare state, not migration.

The lesson is double-edged: hold the center on control, and you can keep the far right from power; lurch too far, and you can hollow out your own coalition.

Cracking the Immigration Code

Four countries offer four different answers—Australia's tough-border multiculturalism, Spain's growth-and-solidarity case, Canada's nation-of-immigrants creed, and Denmark's welfare-state bargain. What they share is not a policy mix but a method: each found the point where control, competence, and generosity fit its own history and values, and held it. There is no template to import, only a discipline to learn.

The winners follow a second rule: they keep the debate focused on how the system works—processing times, selection criteria, who receives a visa, and who is removed. That keeps the fight on the ground of government competence, where a capable state can win, rather than the turf of culture and grievance, where the populist right always wins.

This is where pro-immigration parties keep getting it wrong. When Britain's Keir Starmer tried to sound tough by warning the country risked becoming an "island of strangers," he didn't outflank the right. He alienated some of his own voters and won over none of Reform's.

Talk like the populist right, and you legitimize them. Govern competently, and you can beat them.

How the Big Three Blew It

None of these countries failed because it was too generous. Each failed because its government lost—or never built—public confidence that it was in control.

The United States

America's border woes are a cautionary tale: no consensus, no functioning machinery, no control—and, in the end, no public consent.

The Biden administration never struck the bargain the successful countries did, and control came too late to be believed. At the peak of the surge, border encounters topped two million a year for three consecutive years. To voters, the front door looked unguarded.

A bipartisan border deal finally emerged in February 2024. It was the toughest enforcement package in a generation, negotiated by liberal Democrat Chris Murphy and conservative Republican James Lankford. More than 100 immigrant-rights groups signed a statement opposing it. Then Senate Republicans killed it on Trump's orders, preserving the chaos as a campaign issue.

With Congress refusing to act, the Biden Administration took bold executive action in 2024. It tightened asylum rules, expanded legal pathways, increased removals, and deepened coordination with regional partners. Border Patrol encounters fell sharply: from 249,785 in December 2023 to 47,330 in December 2024—a reduction of 81%.

But the "open borders" label stuck. Democrats walked into the election with a 30-point trust deficit on immigration, and Trump won voters who prioritized the issue 88% to 10%. The control was real. It just wasn't believed.

And late July 2026 offered a live reminder from Spain: even a successful two-track model can be destabilized in days when a court ruling and a foreign partner's brief withdrawal of cooperation combine—an underlining, not a refutation, of the argument that credible legal architecture and steady cooperation with neighbors are inseparable from public consent for legal immigration. Spain returned nearly everyone within 48 hours, kept them out of the rest of Europe, and paired the fix on the ground with the fix in the law. That is what a functional two-track model looks like in a crisis—and it is what Democrats have to build toward.

The United Kingdom

In a post-Brexit United Kingdom, each governing party promised to "take back control." But both Conservatives and Labour delivered the opposite.

Under the Conservatives, net migration skyrocketed to a record 906,000. At the same time, Brexit removed Britain from the European Union's asylum system and helped create a small boats crisis in the English Channel: people who reached Britain could no longer be returned to the first EU country they had entered. The Conservative government's flagship answer—a scheme to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda—became political theater. Not a single person was deported under the program before it was scrapped. The Conservatives were wiped out in the 2024 election.

Keir Starmer's Labour government fumbled the issue too: it talked tough while delivering the wrong policy outcomes. It reduced net migration and proposed making permanent settlement harder. But those were not the areas voters most doubted the government could

control. The small boats kept coming, and the asylum hotels stayed full. Starmer was forced out by his own party in June 2026, and Andy Burnham took over as prime minister in July.

Britain has been trapped in a political doom loop: both major governing parties promised control; neither got it right, and voters increasingly concluded only an outsider could deliver. That is why Nigel Farage's hard-right Reform UK Party led national polling from May 2025 through July 2026—the first time in living memory a party other than Labour or the Conservatives had held that position.

In the last two weeks, that has begun to change. Farage resigned his seat amid a funding scandal, with a roughly \$6.7 million undeclared donation referred to the National Crime Agency. And Burnham's arrival at Number 10 delivered an immediate "Burnham bounce"—Labour caught or overtook Reform in three separate polls in his first week in office, ending Reform's fourteen-month lead. Whether that opening becomes a durable recovery depends in part on whether Burnham can do what his predecessor could not: convert control rhetoric into control voters can see.

Germany

Germany failed in the subtlest way. It did much of what the successful countries did: drew a clear line between legal and irregular migration, expanded legal labor migration to address its demographic needs, and reduced asylum arrivals. But it failed the test that mattered: taking ownership of control and convincing the public that control had been restored.

The center-left Social Democrats (SPD) shared power throughout—in Germany's coalition system, no single party governs alone—first as the junior partner in the grand coalition under center-right chancellor Angela Merkel from 2013 to 2021, then as the senior party leading the government that followed under Chancellor Olaf Scholz from 2021 to 2025. Close enough to own the loss of control, never bold enough to claim its restoration.

Merkel's center-right government admitted roughly 1.1 million asylum seekers in 2015, and by early 2016, 81% of Germans believed the government had lost control. Merkel then moved decisively, personally brokering the March 2016 EU-Turkey agreement that sharply reduced arrivals.

But control restored is not the same as control believed. Asylum arrivals to Germany fell from roughly 890,000 in 2015 (the revised 2015 count) to about 280,000 the following year. But the public perception never recovered.

The New Year's assaults in Cologne, followed by a steady series of high-profile attacks—culminating in a knife attack in Aschaffenburg that killed a toddler shortly before the 2025

election—drowned out the improving data. Each incident appeared to tell voters the same thing: the state couldn't even remove the people it had ordered to leave.

The February 23, 2025, snap election delivered the center-left SPD its worst result since 1887: 16.4%, while the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) won 20.8%. And even after the new center-right government cut asylum applications in half, the AfD kept climbing, reaching roughly 28%.

Once voters decide a party cannot be trusted to assert control, statistics alone will not win them back. A party must take ownership of victories in control.

Take the Heat—For the Right Reasons

The successful countries understood a paradox: a center-left government trying to restore control must be willing to face criticism from its own left. In Australia, Canada, and Denmark, leaders didn't merely tolerate the fury of advocacy groups. They understood that standing firm in the face of such criticism provided evidence to the broader public that they were serious about control.

An aversion to that criticism guarantees failure. And in the United States, the pressure is especially intense because the advocacy sector is richer, louder, and better organized than almost anywhere else.

But taking the heat matters only when a government is delivering. Criticism absorbed while restoring real control is the price of order. Criticism provoked by merely performing toughness is worthless.

Migration researchers call this "control signaling." A 2026 study from the Migration Policy Institute found that policies designed mainly to signal toughness rarely rebuild trust and often make matters worse. Such signaling doesn't change what voters can actually see—whether the government is stopping the disorder it promised to stop.

That is the trap the UK's Labour Home Secretary, Shabana Mahmood, walked into. Leaning on her own origin story as the child of immigrants, she declared that immigration is "fragmenting the nation"—language rebuked as inflammatory—and rolled out sweeping asylum measures modeled on Denmark's strict center-left framework. But Britain is not Denmark. It is a large, comparatively successful multiethnic democracy, closer to Australia or Canada, where the winning formula paired firm border control with confident pluralism—not a cultural crackdown. And Denmark's severity worked, to the extent it did, only because it sat atop a welfare-state bargain and a union-brokered consensus that Britain

lacks. Borrowing the toughness without either the right model or the scaffolding is control signaling in its purest form: the harsh gesture is visible; the credible delivery is not.

The lesson is not that toughness fails. It is that toughness proclaimed but not delivered fails twice: it alienates a party's base while leaving the problem visibly unsolved.

A future center-left government in America will have to rebuild trust the harder way: through real competence and genuine toughness on control; a consistent distinction between legal and illegal immigration; and a loud commitment to fairness, decency, and American values. Starting from the current deep level of distrust in the United States, that will take time. It will require moments of standing firm and absorbing criticism. But that criticism is the price of restoring order—not the byproduct of lashing out at immigrants or talking tough without effect.

What this Means for Democrats

Put the seven cases side by side, and the lesson becomes less a messaging strategy than a governing doctrine.

Democrats should not simply copy any one country's strategy. Denmark's approach would be toxic in the United States. Spain's optimism cannot simply be transplanted into a country where Democrats face a severe trust deficit. Each successful government found the place where control, competence, and generosity fit its own history and values.

America's answer is not hard to name: we are a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants, and the best way to be either is to be both. Democrats do not need to choose between being tougher or kinder. They need to prove they can do both, at the same time.

Run two tracks and say so plainly. Legal and illegal immigration are not the same, and voters—including many Democrats—are not convinced the party recognizes the difference. Make two central promises: expand legal immigration and control the borders.

Earn the right to make the affirmative case. The economic argument for immigration is real and persuasive, but voters will not hear it from a party they don't trust to maintain order. Spain can make that case because Spaniards broadly believe the system is being managed. Facing a trust deficit, Democrats cannot begin in the same place. Order unlocks generosity.

Frame the issue around competence and own it early. Argue about how the system works, not about culture war grievances. Get ahead of the public's demand for order instead of chasing it after the trust has collapsed. That is the ground on which a capable government wins.

Deliver beyond the immigration system itself. This may be the hardest part. Housing is the sharpest example. In Canada, Australia, and Britain, housing shortages that immigration didn't create still became vehicles for immigration backlash. Governments must confront housing as an emergency in its own right—and prevent visible scarcity from becoming evidence that the immigration system is unmanaged.

Level the playing field for all workers. Denmark weakened the argument that immigrants undercut wages by routing labor migration reforms through the unions. As a result, newcomers were seen as reinforcing the wage floor, not threatening it. Spain made a similar bet. It routed migrants toward legal status while raising the minimum wage 66% over eight years and requiring every work permit to pay at least that amount. A newcomer's labor could not legally be used to undercut a native-born worker. The generosity and the guardrail arrived together.

Public consent is lost not just at the border, but in shelters, clinics, housing markets, and school enrollment lines. None of this is simply a messaging problem. It is a governing challenge most parties are not built for—which is exactly why the parties that pull it off are able to keep the far right at bay.

Will Democrats Seize the Day?

The opening for Democrats is real, and it is here now. Trump's version of "control" has curdled into cruelty: mass deportations, due process abuses, sprawling detention centers, and labor shortages driven by negative net immigration. The Republican Party's once-commanding advantage on immigration has narrowed considerably as voters recoil at the extremism.

That creates space for a competent, humane, two-track Democratic position. The country is ready to reward order with generosity.

Here is the bottom line. Order is the price of admission. Competence is critical. Public consent collapses not merely when immigration numbers rise, but when the government appears to have lost control.

The Democratic doctrine should be straightforward: make the whole system—border security, asylum, interior enforcement, worksite enforcement, and public services—function well enough that voters trust the government is in charge. Then, expand legal immigration where the economy demands it and legalize hardworking immigrants who have earned a place here.

The choice in front of every Democrat isn't generosity versus toughness. It's whether the party is disciplined enough to be both.
