Season 3, Episode 4

Hiroshi Motomura: Welcome to Unsettled: Immigration in Turbulent Times. I'm Hiroshi Motomura.

Alex Aleinikoff: I'm Alex Aleinikoff, and Amanda Frost, our co-host, has the week off. We're recording this just two weeks before the midterm elections, and we want to take a look at how the issue of immigration is playing in the campaigns and among the electorate. Hiroshi, immigration was such an important part of the Trump presidential campaigns, both in 2016 when he promised to build the wall, and then in 2024 when he relentlessly attacked the Biden administration for letting in, I guess Trump said, tens of millions of undocumented immigrants. Immigration was a salient issue in both and by all accounts contributed to his wins.

Hiroshi Motomura: But now with the midterms, things look different. The president is underwater on immigration with more Americans disapproving of his policies and actions than approving. So what's happening on the campaign trail? How's immigration likely to play in the close elections? And what are the candidates saying?

Alex Aleinikoff: We're joined today by Adrian Carrasquillo, who writes the *Huddled Masses* newsletter at The Bulwark. As you can tell from the title, he focuses on immigration, and he has also written for many years on American politics.

Adrian, great we can have you with us today.

Adrian Carrasquillo: Thank you so much for having me.

Alex Aleinikoff: So immigration has been front and center in Trump's presidential campaigns, and it seems to have worked for him. He's not on the ballot this November, but he is on the campaign trail. Is he still talking about immigration?

Adrian Carrasquillo: I think that what we've seen is that his administration has not stopped in ways that are surprising sometimes to people that are around politics.

You would think maybe they would take it a little easier on immigration, sort of the cynical play. Before the election, they increased their overreach, their lawlessness on immigration, we see that his polling takes a hit, and particularly on immigration. What has been, I think, striking is the level to which people like Stephen Miller, who runs his domestic policy, are just doing whatever they can, whatever they want, when it comes to not just illegal immigration, but also legal immigration. And I've written recently about the way that they're just, like, destroying the visa system and the ability for us to get the best and the brightest, which I think everybody agrees is the point of America. That's what is a great thing, to bring people here and for them to share their talents with us as a country.

You know what we have really seen is that the administration has not stopped when it comes to their immigration policy and their mass deportation machine.

Alex Aleinikoff: Yeah, and that's surprising because as voters are asked about the most important issue in this election, they say corruption, high prices, the economy, healthcare, and immigration is not listed, at least not with the saliency that it was in earlier elections. What role do you think immigration's gonna play in this election?

Adrian Carrasquillo: One thing I think about sometimes is that, yes, in certain elections an issue might have more saliency, right? We've seen that happen with abortion, and then the next election not as much, though Democrats were still trying to talk about it. We obviously have seen the way that immigration was huge in 2024.

I'll give you a little bit of preview of a piece that I am working on for post-election. When I talk to the people that work in races, 21 races across the country that have Latino populations, and as we know a district could have 15% Latino population. It could have 40, 50. There's places in California and Texas and Florida where it could be 80, 90% and above. So when we talk about a Latino district, it's gonna look different in Colorado than it's gonna look in Texas. But what they have seen, and the reason that a lot of Democrats are feeling hopeful because what they've been hearing in polling, in focus groups, in tracking of these communities is that ICE is an issue.

The overreach, the lawlessness when it comes to ICE. I talked to one person who's doing this work who told me that when you're working for the Democratic Party, you really stress test these ads. There's a lot of people that would love to have other ads on climate and other things, but you really bring it down to the bare bones.

And he told me that he's only running three ads. And he does a bunch of mail. We're talking millions of pieces of mail across the country, things like that. And you get into radio ads and TV

and Spanish language, digital bilingual stuff. So he said they're running prices, right? Gas prices, so that's economy. They're running corruption. That's the second one. And the third one they're doing is they're running anti-ICE ads.

So there's a reason why. And what we found at *The Bulwark* when we would do our focus groups– of course, look, somebody just voted for Trump in November. They weren't regretting their vote in January, February. And so you're having conversations with people, March, April, and they're not there yet. But as different things started happening, Kilmar Abrego Garcia being summarily sent to El Salvador, which they said was an administrative error.

You started seeing that, which led to LA in the summer and things like that. And we would do focus groups with Latino voters that had voted for Biden in 2020 and had switched to Trump in 2024. So we know that these are people that are persuadable in some way.

And they would say, it'd be like a Latino man who works in construction, and he would say “I voted for Trump for the economy, but now that's not what's happening. Now there's tariffs, and now they're grabbing my construction buddies off the job site.” So that's where we started to see the beginning of the ways that immigration may not be the top issue for people, but I found it to be a strong second or third sort of buttressing issue when you are frustrated about the economy, when you are frustrated about things that you were promised he was gonna do.

One of the pollsters that I talk to a lot at Equis, and they do Democratic research, and he would describe it as Trump's wrong priorities, where people would say, "Why are we doing the Iran war when we're supposed to fix the economy? Why are we building a ballroom?"

Which gets into corruption. There is, of course, as we know, an extent where these issues are intertwined, and we see in communities where maybe the top polling thing is not an immigration advocate yelling at you and saying, "This is un-American." But it does work when a farmer is saying, "Why are they doing this to our community?" Or when a pastor says, "Why are they taking our neighbors away?" And ties the importance of these members or their community to how much they help the economy as well. So those things can be tied together.

Hiroshi Motomura: We've been talking about voters, things that move voters, but I want to switch it to something that's obviously related but a little bit different, and that is the candidates. And you've recently written a piece that described the softer position on immigration that some Republican candidates are taking, and I want you to say more about that because, as I read this piece of yours, there's a couple angles of that, right?

One is, for example, you talk about the effects specifically on the cattle ranching industry. That was in Kansas, but you also talk about Texas, which is at least in your story, less about industry than on really the Latino vote. And so just I'm interested in what you can say about the Republican candidates with a particular sense of the regionality of this.

Adrian Carrasquillo: Yeah. I think that when you hear something like Kansas, you're thinking, "Okay, solidly red, ruby red." And it's worth noting that Roger Marshall, who's the senator, the

Republican senator from Kansas, he won by 11 points in his previous race in 2020, and that was apparently a competitive race. There hasn't been a Democrat statewide for a century, so this is what we're talking about when we're talking about Kansas. In the entire election, Roger Marshall has not found it necessary to speak up about ICE. But suddenly he's speaking up, and he's saying that law enforcement needs to be made aware of what ICE is doing.

But why is he saying this? Because what I saw and what I found was that law enforcement was being caught flat-footed that ICE was gonna be doing these operations and saying to, to the statewide Republicans, "Why is this happening?" Complaining, right?

And that gets into the cattle industry, ranching being very upset. They released these statements where they said, "When you do this for a day or for a few hours and you disrupt what we're doing, that actually causes us delays and issues and raises beef prices and causes issues for days and weeks after that."

So you can see the way that the constituencies in these particular areas start lighting up, and then all of a sudden Roger Marshall's talking about ICE. What ICE did was they put checkpoints along a major road that leads to the meatpacking plants. And so we see when the local economy is being affected in the triangle of beef in Kansas, all of a sudden Roger Marshall's speaking up.

Now, would he be speaking up if he was winning by 10? I bet he wouldn't be, because recent polls have shown that he's in a tight neck-and-neck race with a pastor, Adam Hamilton. And those are the kind of candidates that Democrats are gonna run in a place like Kansas if they wanna win.

And what I saw in Texas, I've written a couple stories, and one of them was about the construction industry and how it was suffering in certain areas in the South, in places like Texas. I talked to the South Texas Builders Association. It doesn't take much talk to get out of these guys that they voted for Trump. One of the guys down there, Mario Guerrero.

I even remember being struck by him trying to understand why this was happening and trying to game out, because he doesn't understand. Because he's like, "This is bad for the economy when you are attacking these companies." What's been happening is ICE basically goes onto construction sites and goes onto half-built homes and walks into private property, which they're not supposed to be doing. This has been the center of lawsuits and things like that. We have seen that in places where you did not expect, because of the economic impact, Republicans have been speaking up and finding themselves stuck between a rock and a Trump place.

Hiroshi Motomura: But the other aspect in Texas you write about is the effect on the Latino vote, right? This is not just a construction industry or cattle industry question, but it really has this kind of demographic voter impact.

Adrian Carrasquillo: Yeah, and I think we're gonna see that in Talarico's race. I think you have Monica De La Cruz who is a Republican congresswoman who's running against Bobby Pulido.

Bobby Pulido's a Tejano singer. He's won a lot of Latin Grammys. He's beloved down there. There's been a lot of evidence that she is sort of out of touch, but also is screwed when it comes to her closeness with Trump.

Earlier in the cycle, she said, "This is a guy that he's there to sing at your quinceañera. That's it." And so then Bobby Pulido started singing at everyone's quinceañera, and he's done dozens. It's so many quinceañeras he's done. And so number one, that was dumb. But number two, she wants to go to the midterm convention and she wants to praise Trump, but then she wants to release ads on stuff she's done in immigration. And, she was asked about this on CNN the other day because the question becomes, you're elevating a couple instances where you spoke about immigration, but she didn't speak up when two US citizen teenagers were on their way to enroll in the Marines.

They were bringing their documentation, and they were stopped by ICE. They were beat up by ICE, and now they're not gonna sign up for the Marines anymore, and that was in her district. That's just an example of the way that ICE and what's going on with immigration has put these Republicans in a really tough spot.

Hiroshi Motomura: To shift to another region, you've written more recently about California. ICE activity is ramping up. What's going on in California? Is it an electoral impact question or is it really going after California?

Adrian Carrasquillo: Yeah, I think that's a concern that people could have. But what I got out of that story was these activists saying, "Spread power, not panic." Each single one of them in different interviews telling me that. And one of my rules with reporting has always been, like, if I hear something three times, I wanna kinda look into it and see, how much of this is a trend and things like that.

And it just all happened very quickly, where I was suddenly hearing from a lot of folks in California that were saying that of course we know that ICE has been national, and of course we know that ICE has been in California. But they described it as before, people were going to their immigration check-ins in court, and they were being let out the back door detained.

But what started happening was they started going after gardening trucks and work trucks and farm workers, work site raids and things like that. And so these organizer groups that have mostly young Latino staff and organizers and volunteers are saying we live in rural areas in Central Valley, and they are taking these back roads while they drive to go canvass. And so now we have to stop, pause that work, and we have to train them on what to do if ICE confronts them, because we know that these confrontations often turn violent, and they could be deadly. But after they told me the reasons they were concerned, one father dropping off a kid to community college and they were detained, and then that's where there's a ballot drop-off location.

So after they explained to me the reasons why Latinos were understandably concerned, they started telling me about what they're doing to make sure that they're only sharing verified

sightings of ICE, not just following rumors online, but using rapid response to then go and make sure that's actually happening. They're doing things like banda marches to the polls, 500 different instances they wanna do, which is similar to what they did in 2024, of going with a band and playing music, Mexican regional music, and going and making noise. And what they said is the power is in a lot of people being there.

You feel more powerless and more fearful when you're alone, but when you can bring people together. That story ended with Chuck Rocha, who's a prominent Democratic strategist, just saying this is really dumb for the administration to be doing, because all it's reminding people is that ICE is unpopular, Trump is unpopular, and then you go down the line. His corruption, $6 diesel, and things like that. That is, that's what the story was in California.

Alex Aleinikoff: Adrian, what you seem to be saying is that there's a real gap here between the Republican candidates and the administration, where Trump almost doesn't care about what happens in the midterms. He's gonna press ahead, or Miller will press ahead with their mass deportation program, and they'll deal with the consequences. Is that fair?

Adrian Carrasquillo: I think that's fair. I think that one thing that I had in one of my stories was Tom Homan saying to a group of Hispanics in Florida, in Doral, "Wait till you see what we do next year." And that, of course, is alarming, right? When you've got a tiger backed up in a corner; if they lose Congress and there's gonna be more accountability, but they have all this money, more money than all these law enforcement agencies around the country, and they're definitely gonna be able to do dangerous things and continue their campaign of cruelty over the next two years.

I think what is instructive and what is important, and as we keep going to the effect on the economy. Voters that hinged their vote on the border being porous and were upset with what Biden was doing on the border the way that you are now getting their attention is on economic concerns. I went down to Florida, I went down to Miami, and I just, I did a couple stories, and one of them was in Doral.

And in Doral, in these Venezuelan communities, a lot of people had Temporary Protected Status, which they've lost, and so I wrote about how Doral's a ghost town now. I went to this restaurant called El Arepazo, so it's Venezuelan, and sell a lot of arepas and empanadas and different things like that. And this was a place that the owner loves Trump so much. It was an exceedingly uncomfortable interaction to watch because Trump went for a four-minute visit to his restaurant, and this guy who's spoken at Republican National Conventions, and this guy's a Republican, but he loves Trump, and he said that Trump's the best president that the country's ever had.

And then Trump shook his hand, and the guy's sort of on the verge of emotion was saying "I just wanna be loyal to you." And so that restaurant I went to, and I spoke to one of the employees, because I've gone to Chicago and I've gone to Minneapolis, and I've gone to places where ICE has really harmed the local businesses. And the number that I hear in those cities is 40%, normally, 40, 50%. So I said, how much is your business down? Is it 40%? And the woman said

more like 80% and that the specials that they make, they go bad because people don't buy them, so they have to throw them out.

So that's just an example in a place where the owner loved Trump and talked about how great he was, of how the local businesses are struggling and the economic corridors in the Latino areas. That has wide effects, as we know.

Alex Aleinikoff: Trump continues to vilify immigrants, and he takes every opportunity to demonize particularly Haitians and Somalis, and now we've seen the FBI raid on Representative Ilhan Omar's home, reportedly looking for evidence about her naturalization, which took place decades ago. I can imagine this appeals to some part of the MAGA base, but do you think it's gonna be off-putting to other communities, other parts of the electorate?

Adrian Carrasquillo: What happened with Ilhan Omar there's so many parts. Obviously on its face, the raid of her home is, it's disgusting, and it's stuff where the Trump administration in the past looked into this. There's been no issue in the past. And so we know that what they're trying to do, and Tom Homan saying "Yes, we could, denaturalize her and deport her," all that stuff is insane.

But the way that it was tied with the anti-Somali sentiment from Trump, where the week before he was talking about Somalians in Minnesota and how, that they're dangerous and they need to be kicked out, and that Minnesotans need to fight back for their community. And he's always said anti-Somali things. So now you have what happens with Ilhan Omar a few days later.

It's worth noting what they did with Haitians in Ohio and in Florida, and taking away their TPS. It's interesting to me because we know that the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, the Congressional Black Caucus, they don't always have overlapping issues that they care about, and they have different constituencies. But I think that there's a push by what this administration is doing to make African Americans pay more attention to immigration when they see that Haitians are being taken away in chains in glossy DHS videos that the Secretary of Homeland Security is sharing.

And then now the way they're talking about Somalis. And there's even racism that we saw in Texas, - this severe anti-Indian racism; and that starts tying into that Indians get a lot of H-1B visas, and the way that the administration is trying to destroy legal immigration and visas. So there's just so much, it's really if you're not white, you're not right. And we've seen that they've brought in white South Africans and things like that. I remember at the beginning of the administration, you were like, "Does this administration only want white immigrants?" And you weren't sure if you could say that, but now it's pretty clear that's what's going on.

Hiroshi Motomura: Of course, we can't foresee what the Democrats will be able to do in this upcoming midterms, but suppose they take back the House and the Senate. Do you foresee any significant legislation coming out of the next Congress?

Adrian Carrasquillo: That's another story I wanna do post-election, and I think that the Democratic Party is just gonna really need to be careful and smart on what they do here. By the way, calling it a broken immigration system is a bipartisan message. Democrats and Republicans have been saying that for decades. So you have a broken immigration system that now has been, chiseled, eroded, broken down by this administration, and if you don't do anything on immigration, if you decide that the only part about immigration that was important was using it in an anti-Trump way, you are just leaving this broken system for the next person that comes in, the next Republican, the next MAGA, whether it's J.D. Vance or Marco Rubio down the road, whoever it is, and you are leaving this system in a really weak and vulnerable place for people to attack it in the future. And so what is really easy is being anti-Trump on immigration. What immediately becomes difficult is when Democrats try to figure out what consensus would be and what they should do.

Gabe Vasquez has legislation about care workers. If you're a care worker, and if you've been here for a certain amount of years, and these different legislation might get a million people or two million people or three million people to have some type of legal status or citizenship. These are the hard questions, but this is why they would be taking over and Democrats would have to be governing. And to figure out what they're gonna do. I think Robert Garcia said that immigration's gonna be his fourth priority. But what I find interesting about that is that in the past, if Democrats said immigration was a fourth priority, there would be a lot of activists and a lot of people on the left getting upset about that. But now with the state of things, I was hearing from a lefty activist today who was like, "You know what? Fourth is not bad, but we're gonna press them. We're gonna press them on that." .

I think a huge part of it's gonna be accountability, the corruption, the DHS bringing in people, Noem and Lewandowski. And Democrats sent all these letters in the first two years, and people were "What is this letter? What is the point of it?" You send these letters so that there's this paper trail, so that then when you do accountability, you can say, "Hey, we sent you these letters on these issues, these horrible circumstances and the state of things and detention centers and things like that. You never answered our letter, and this was, January 2026, et cetera. We sent you these things on Minneapolis and what happened to the killing of two US citizens."

So that's gonna be really interesting to watch. I'm not sure yet. I'm gonna work on that story after the election. But if Democrats win big, then it's gonna be incumbent upon them to do something on immigration, or else you just let this issue float there as it has for the previous decades and that is what has helped Republicans, this broken system they've been able to take advantage of.

Hiroshi Motomura: Part of what I hear you saying about accountability though is that it's gonna take, going back to the first part you were saying, more than accountability and going after Noem. It's gonna take something that is going to be more affirmative. And I guess I'm hearing you also say that is regardless of veto, right?

Adrian Carrasquillo: We hear from our audience every day, and we have millions of subscribers across YouTube and our newsletters, and people really do want accountability, and people want people to go to jail, and people are really upset with what's happened to their

country. So I just know that what we've seen in the past from the Schumers and the Jeffries of the world is probably not gonna be enough, and people really want some substantial checks on the Trump administration. When they see what they're doing across so many issues, they're horrified.

And so I just think that Democrats are really gonna have to figure out what that plan looks like because you just immediately go into 2028 after that. I think a lot of folks are really tired of what this administration has done, including people who voted for Trump in 2024.

Alex Aleinikoff: Adrian, we're gonna have to check back with you after the election and see what happened and what's next. But thanks so much for being with us today. Really interesting.

Adrian Carrasquillo: No, let's see what happens, and thank you so much for having me. It's obviously, there's so much here, so we will get back to it after the election.

Hiroshi Motomura: I was really struck by all the insights that Adrian shared with us. It's hard to talk about immigration without talking about the country, without talking about history. And so I'm wondering if you say that people's attitudes on immigration have shifted in some measure in the last year or so, I'm worried about something that's not necessarily being measured here. And that is that the Trump presidency, his campaign, if you go back to 2015, has activated a lot of racial, linguistic, cultural issues, maybe even resentments.

And I'm just wondering how much of this is a latent non-pollable vote. In other words, how many people when they step inside the booth in a ballot box or fill out a mail-in ballot at home, how much is the ultimate vote in the end when people just can't decide till the moment they cast their vote?

They're not necessarily voting on immigration per se, but really it's a referendum on the notion of heritage Americans. And, but of course, I think one of the things that came out in the interview is that some of that's backfiring but not necessarily all of it. And I'm just wondering if it's – I wouldn't say superficial – but at least it doesn't capture the full picture if you think of immigration as an immigration issue. This is more a referendum. I think the Trump presidency has made it something more of a referendum on what we want the future demographics of this country to be, and I just don't know which way that cuts in this election.

Alex Aleinikoff: I'm a little less worried about that than you perhaps because I think the economic issues, prices, affordability, mortgage rates, everything is so much more important to people that it's unlikely that the cultural issue on demography will play a role except for people who are already so strongly identified with this issue that, that are gonna be voting one way or the other anyway.

So I'm not overly concerned, but what I am really intrigued by is how this issue just has flipped, that this was all Trump could talk about in his elections. And now Republicans are beginning to run away from it. Certainly no one is up there strongly defending ICE. It's not a major issue for

the election. And the Democrats, if anyone, are making an issue out of it by, by in some places talking about the excesses; and I think we really saw the flip here with Minneapolis.

Hiroshi Motomura: Yeah, part of me is inclined to agree with you, but part of me also will say something that might cut against what I was saying earlier about the deeper background here and the cultural and racial background. And that is that I'm struck in immigration politics how some things stay the same, but other things flip.

I'm thinking about how DACA, when it was first announced was seen or first advocated for, was seen as something that was really beyond imagination, beyond the doable, beyond the legal. And then it got normalized, not necessarily for the whole population, but for many people. And I'm just wondering when you have an issue where messaging is so important, when its use in partisan politics is so important, maybe it shouldn't surprise us that things flip when the messaging starts to backfire and other messages take hold, like the economy, like you said.

Alex Aleinikoff: Yeah. And it was interesting Adrian mentioned the legislation that may be introduced to help care workers, and you can imagine these kinds of piecemeal legalization proposals–and for DACA recipients as well, Dreamers, that maybe finally can take hold. But I'm not sure we have a great answer to the veto here, and it's not clear what Trump would do or what he'd be pushed to do and, if there's significant Republican losses here, the party will be moving away from Trump over the next couple of years.

He's not gonna be moving anywhere and he may double down on all his stuff, really trying to make sure he gets his million people deported every year, and things could get a lot worse, which would mean that he's not gonna play ball at all on legalization or any kind of ameliorative legislation.

On the other hand, if the Republicans really get to him or if J.D. Vance gets to him and says, "Hey, we're not gonna win in two years unless we soften this a bit. Why don't you sign a bill that takes care of some populations," maybe we'll see a change. I don't think that's in the cards. I don't think he cares about the party. I don't think he cares about winning more elections. I think he cares about himself.

Hiroshi Motomura: Yeah, I agree with you on Trump. But I think Adrian's absolutely right that it's a moment for Democrats to do not just accountability, but to stake out a position that is not just anti-Trump, but really lay out a plan, and that's gonna be a tall order. But in that sense, it's a part of the natural run-up to the '28 presidential election. What would *you* do for immigration?

Alex Aleinikoff: I think we've talked about this for 20 years. We know what we do. The the deal always was, seal the border, legalize long-term immigrants here, be generous as to high-skilled workers. We have draft after draft of legislation here. And now the border has been largely sealed, it's time to take care of some of these long-term populations who have been here in undocumented status and probably fix the asylum rules a bit.. I think a consensus could be

reached, but again I'm most worried, as you raised, Hiroshi, about a Trump veto that'll make all legislation really impossible until after 2028.

Hiroshi Motomura: We focused on undocumented immigration, we focused on enforcement, our next episode we'll switch to focusing on lawful immigration pathways, and our guest will be Julia Gelatt of the Migration Policy Institute.

Alex Aleinikoff: Look forward to seeing you then.

Hiroshi Motomura: See you then.