Skittish Republicans Discover That ICE Is Bad—for Their Campaigns

Some endangered incumbents are trying to outrun the electoral consequences of Trump's immigration agenda.

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(Photo illustration by Bill Kuchman/*The Bulwark* | Photos: Getty, Shutterstock)

KANSAS SEN. ROGER MARSHALL had an uncharacteristically forthright moment last week when he voiced some concerns about ICE's activities in his state.

"When ICE operates in Kansas, it needs to coordinate with our local law enforcement. Our sheriffs and police know these communities better than anyone, and working together keeps officers and residents safe," the Republican Marshall tweeted. "I'm closely following what's

happening in SW Kansas and have been in direct contact with Secretary Mullin and local law enforcement as ICE executes warrants in order to keep Kansans safe."

Marshall's almost-criticism of ICE came after the agency increased operations in three Kansas cities—Garden City, Dodge City, and Liberal—and local police complained to state leaders about not being notified ahead of time.

So, what's the beef? Well, in Marshall's case it's partly about the cattle industry.

The increased ICE enforcement operations began in Kansas's "Golden Triangle of Beef." The agency conducted its random car stops on the main road headed toward a meatpacking plant, which forced managers to change up shifts because their staff were detained or too scared to drive to work, the *New York Times* reported.

Nine Republican state lawmakers representing Southwest Kansas sent a letter addressed to Trump (as well as to Senators Marshall and Jerry Moran, and Rep. Tracey Mann) saying that "effective enforcement depends on trust" and "strong borders and fair treatment of our neighbors are not competing goals."

Fears about economic damage and community disruption extend beyond the Sunflower State. The Kansas Livestock Association joined with the Texas Cattle Feeders Association and Oklahoma Cattlemen's Association to release a joint statement warning that the increased enforcement has already delayed cattle shipments.

"These disruptions come at a time of enhanced focus and pressure on the cattle and beef supply chain," the statement read. "They are a costly and unnecessary impact to cattle producers already suffering from unwelcome political interference to both the markets as well as the physical supply chain."

The statement emphasized that the harms the ICE actions cause to producers in the industry "last for days and weeks after such operations conclude."

But this is not just about beef. Marshall is suddenly stuck in a close election fight during a cycle that could be brutal for Republicans, in a state that hasn't elected a Democrat to the U.S. Senate in nearly a century. In a "competitive" race in 2020, Marshall won by a cool 11 points.

Things have changed, though, with the Democratic nominee, Adam Hamilton, a prominent pastor, leading Marshall 45 to 43 in a recent Emerson poll.

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MARSHALL IS NOT THE ONLY Republican suddenly beginning to see ICE's aggressive enforcement and lawlessness as politically toxic, something Americans have been signaling to pollsters since last summer.

Sen. Jim Justice (R-W.V.), for his part, doesn't have electoral concerns, he just decided to drop some actual clear-eyed analysis—after ranching groups complained.

"To get better, the first thing you got to do is admit you're doing something wrong," he said, noting that "you're dragging people away that have lived on your street corner for 15 years, and I don't know that we need to be doing that."

Still, for others, November is the clear and present danger.

In her first general-election ad this cycle, Florida's Republican Rep. María Elvira Salazar broke with Trump on immigration in a district he won by 15 points just two years ago, warning that his advisers were taking him down a path that has antagonized the Latino voters who helped him win in 2024. She noted that half of the 50,000 people arrested by ICE in July did not have criminal records.

It might be a case of too little, too late. Salazar has had ample opportunity to criticize Trump on immigration over the past year. Instead she's fallen back on the same tired lines whenever the topic comes up, imagining a scenario in which Trump advances some nebulous grand bargain that makes him for immigration what Ronald Reagan was for communism *or Abraham Lincoln was for slavery* (?!). (If you have any idea at all what she's talking about, please comment below.)

For her trouble, Salazar caught a Truth Social repost tirade from Trump on Saturday. The president accused her of betrayal and of supporting "amnesty," and he called for her replacement. The harangue was a far cry from his "Complete and Total Endorsement" of Salazar from last month. Sad!

Meanwhile, Monica De La Cruz, a Latina lawmaker in a dogfight with Tejano singer Bobby Pulido for Texas's 15th Congressional District, released a video similar to Salazar's, although she hasn't received as much attention for it. That might be because she avoided calling out Trump directly. Instead, De La Cruz's ad highlighted her efforts to get a DACA recipient released from ICE custody. The spot featured the released man's wife, Stephanie Villareal, emphasizing the need for a secure border while also repeatedly calling the immigration system "broken."

Republicans like De La Cruz are stuck between a rock and a MAGA place on immigration ahead of the midterms. However much she tries to sound like a Democrat in her ad, De La Cruz evidently didn't feel she

could go so far as to criticize Trump, and she also praised him at the Republican midterm convention.

Last Friday, the Cook Political Report called her race against Pulido a tossup—a monumental shift in the 15th Congressional District, where Republicans have been building support in recent election cycles, with Trump winning by 3 in 2020, De La Cruz winning by 14 in 2022, and Trump growing his margin to 18 points in 2024.

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De La Cruz wants to have it both ways on immigration. While she highlights positive stories in her ads, she kept quiet after ICE agents attacked two teenaged U.S. citizens in her district. The young men were on their way to enlist in the U.S. Marines.

But campaign rhetoric aside, Republicans like De La Cruz and Salazar and Marshall can only run so far from their voting records and chumminess with Trump when the going was good for them.

“She’s trying to do damage control, given the district is over 80 percent Hispanic and [the Rio Grande Valley] is the worst-hit region in Texas with the ICE raids, without angering Trump,” a Pulido ally not authorized to speak on the record told me of De La Cruz’s conundrum. “But this is directly a result of [Trump] and the terrible votes she’s taken.”

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