Trump Gave Democrats an Opening on Immigration. They’re Afraid to Take It.

The abuses have piled up. The polling has moved. Immigration groups urge House Dems to run on the issue.

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(Photo by Ryan Murphy / AFP via Getty Images)

YOU MIGHT THINK DEMOCRATS would be up in arms over the violence perpetrated by the Trump administration and its agencies in implementing its deportation agenda.

And on its official social media channels, the Democratic party has issued powerful statements, as well as posts highlighting the last words of those killed by state violence.

But a closer look reveals that that social media energy has not translated into actual midterm messaging.

On July 26, less than two weeks after Johan Sebastián Durán Guerrero's death in Maine, House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries unveiled the party's "Fighting for an Affordable America" agenda in Pennsylvania alongside Gov. Josh Shapiro. The program made clear how the Democrats are framing the run-in to the midterms, with a focus on pocketbook issues such as (in the AP's summary) "restoring healthcare cuts, bringing the cost of living down and ending the war in Iran to beat Republicans and hold President Donald Trump accountable."

Glaringly absent from the Democratic priorities: reining in ICE abuses.

Again, it's not that Democrats aren't aware of the case for urgent action on Trump's deportation regime. Privately, immigration advocacy groups have been pushing for them to speak out. Just four days before Jeffries's agenda unveiling and before the August recess, a hundred Democratic members of Congress were briefed on the stakes of—and the electoral opportunity in—facing Trump's brutal anti-immigrant program head-on.

During a weekly meeting convened by Rep. Katherine Clark, the House Democratic whip, Todd Schulte and Maria Praeli of the immigration-advocacy group FWD.us encouraged House Dems to meet the moment by "confronting anti-immigrant actions and violence." Their PowerPoint presentation, obtained by *The Bulwark*, contends that the country has undergone a transformation on immigration in the last year, making immigration a viable, even critical, electoral issue that Democrats must seize upon heading into this fall's midterms.

Schulte and Praeli told the Democratic lawmakers that forcing a government shutdown fight over Department of Homeland Security funding after the killings of Renée Good and Alex Pretti in Minneapolis—and linking immigration enforcement overreach and waste with affordability in general—was a political success, reinforcing voters' growing belief that Trump's priorities are warped.

They also highlighted that ICE's exorbitant funding extends well past Trump's term into 2029. And not only that—with the money that Congress has appropriated for it, the agency could actually continue to run at fiscal year 2025 levels well past the end of the decade, with enough cash to keep going "without [receiving] another dime until 2033." Schulte and Praeli emphasized that ICE is toxic among voters: Citing data from the progressive polling firm Navigator showing ICE at its lowest net approval rating this spring, even before its recent Houston and Maine killings, which they linked to the $270 billion it received in federal funding.

The pair recommended a range of action items for Democrats to profitably focus attention on immigration, including advising them to:

- mention specific stories of individuals who have been here for decades and are caught in the Trump administration dragnet,
- continue to tie immigration overreach and corruption to affordability concerns,
- hold more detention center visits,
- conduct field hearings, and
- participate in national days of action for Lorenzo Salgado Araujo and Johan Sebastián Guerrero.

The advice for Democrats to go on the strategic offensive on immigration was offered in part to further shake the party out of its post–2024 election paralysis. Back then, Democrats felt that they had completely missed where Americans were on questions of border

security and immigration. That uncertainty led to awkward strategic silences and a lack of coherent strategy in response to the early ramp-up of Trump's mass deportation campaign.

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During those bleak months, Democrats regularly assured me that Trump would go too far and a messaging opening would appear, but until that happened, they and their colleagues were frozen.

Trump did go too far, and some of the administration's most egregious actions chipped away at voter trust in the president and his party on immigration. The presentation reminded lawmakers of the litany of DHS scandals and outrages over the last year and a half, including the time Kilmar Ábrego Garcia was mistakenly sent to a torture prison in El Salvador, and the multiple invasions of American cities, which started with federal agents descending on Los Angeles last summer and eventually resulted in shocking deaths in Minneapolis and elsewhere.

The proof is in the polling. A Fox News survey from mid-July shows voters now trust Democrats on immigration more than they do Republicans, eating into a previously winning issue for the GOP.

The party's left flank long ago began to heed the call to push back against Trump more assertively on immigration, but their more moderate colleagues have often seemed more hesitant. Chris Newman, legal director of the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON) and an attorney for Ábrego García, published an opinion article this week titled "Trump's Immigration Policies Have Been Rejected; Why Won't Dems Act Like It?"

Newman argued that Trump was always going to fail on immigration, and Democrats, too cowed to speak up in March 2025, now have an opportunity to do so with voter winds in their sails.

“Democratic elites should join the grassroots in fighting the real adversary—the brutal, violent, white-nationalist deportation campaign now tearing this country apart. They should get out of their conference rooms and Zoom calls and hit the streets with us,” he wrote.

Newman praised Democrats like Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.) who went to El Salvador to meet with Ábrego García, as well as Reps. Joaquin Castro, who fought for the release of children and families from the detention center in Dilley, Texas, and Sylvia Garcia (D-Tex.), who stood with Lorenzo Salgado Araujo’s family after his killing in Houston. There were others, too, like Sen. Andy Kim and Reps. LaMonica McIver and Rob Menendez, who fought against the abuses of Delaney Hall, a detention center in their state of New Jersey.

“Every Democrat should do the same,” Newman wrote. “Not as a photo op, but because it’s right. And because in every election to come, Democrats will be judged not by their campaign promises, but by what they did in the years Trump was in office.”

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Still, a good chunk of the Democratic party seems to remain in that state of paralysis. In reporting this story, I heard over and over from Democrats involved in tight races that while immigration is a top-polling issue across the country, campaigns weren’t willing to risk advertising on it, especially now that we’re just three months out from November’s general election. Putting campaign dollars into anti-ICE messaging is still considered too much of a gamble.

“It was everywhere in the primary. When it was Dem-on-Dem, every Democrat was using immigration and ICE as a cudgel,” one strategist

involved in more than fifteen Democratic races across the country told me. “Now in the general, pollsters do a poll and immigration shows up as a top-three issue, but Democrats are scared to talk about it because they think it’s going to turn off Trump voters, and they’re wrong.”

The pattern often becomes visible in local races, where money is tight, and campaign teams prefer to spend it on safe and reliable messaging on economic issues and Trump’s corruption rather than gambling it by crafting anti-ICE ads or making immigration policy pronouncements. That dynamic has been reinforced by outside PACs and groups, who can’t coordinate with the campaigns directly on messaging, and so need to take their cues from what the campaign prioritizes publicly. That coordination-by-another-name works easiest when the campaign’s messaging is most familiar to everyone involved.

Not all Democrats are locked into the old patterns. Manny Rutinel, a 31-year-old Colorado state House member running for Congress in the hypercompetitive 8th district, which the Cook Political Report rates a tossup, has put immigration at the center of his campaign. During the primary, he picked it up and used it to hammer his opponent Shannon Bird over an ICE-in-sensitive-locations bill; he clobbered her by 28 points. Rutinel is still talking immigration, now in the context of the general election, which he hopes to win to represent the most Hispanic congressional district in Colorado. Rutinel makes his priorities clear on the front page of his website: An inscription there reads, “I’m running to represent Colorado’s 8th Congressional District, and I’m fighting to lower costs, stop ICE from terrorizing our communities, and stand up to Trump’s attacks on our rights.”

“There was a bill where we came together to be able to stop ICE from going into schools and hospitals,” Rutinel told me, recounting his work in the state legislature:

> It was a clear demonstration that Donald Trump isn’t interested in safety. What he’s doing here is targeting women and children, and

> terrifying our communities. . . . I highlighted that bill because there was a contrast there. It's personal for me as a son of an immigrant in a district that is 40 percent Latino.

While few districts nationwide have such high Latino populations, Rutinel's approach could still be adapted to campaigns in other parts of the country. He told me the people of his district feel betrayed by Trump for failing to follow through on his promise to go after violent criminals and instead tearing families apart.

"Folks are feeling the whole thing is being mismanaged. The focus is not on things they want the Trump administration to focus on. Folks across this district can't afford rent," he added, before lumping Trump and his opponent Gabe Evans together: "If they spent as much time thinking about lowering costs as they do about tormenting immigrants, things would be less expensive."

Colin Rogero, a Democratic admaker who worked on two immigration-related ads hitting Bird for Somos PAC, a Latino voter-engagement group that backed Rutinel, told me Democrats can't allow Republicans to define the playing field on immigration.

"It moves us enough to the right that it has voters asking what the difference is between us and Republicans when we're taking money from the same people," he said. "They shouldn't just be killing and jailing people indiscriminately, but who is saying we have to stand up and fight that? It has to be us as a party."

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