

# BUTT CRACKS AND BEER BELLIES: IS TRUMP FAILING ON IMMIGRATION BECAUSE ICE CREATES NEGATIVE SPECTACLE?

Is the spectacular nature of Stephen Miller's ICE goons – and the ease with which that can go viral – one of the reasons Miller's core issue is weighing Trump down?

Greg Sargent has been focused on Trump's collapse on immigration for months, encouraging Dems to attack on it. And G. Elliott Morris has been tracking the details of that in polling, which also goes back months.

A new report from Gallup out this week finds a significant increase in the public's liberal attitudes on immigration. The highlights of their report are here:

- *30% of Americans want immigration decreased, down from 55% a year ago*
- *A record-high 79% of adults consider immigration good for the country*
- *There's been a meaningful decrease in support for building a border wall, mass deportation*

But aside from Morris' argument, in June that

the inflection point was the Kilmar Abrego case, I'm not sure either has unpacked *why* immigration has become such a bad issue for Trump (though some of it stems from Latinos souring on Trump), a trend that has continued even as Abrego's case has gotten far less attention.

I've been formulating this hypothesis in conjunction with two posts I'm writing, one about Stephen Miller's strengths and (very considerable) weaknesses, and another about the pivot to crime that Miller is attempting in the wake of Charlie Kirk's death. Stephen Miller is effectively running the government, Trump's Wormtongue, his issue is immigration, but the issue is dragging Trump down.

Miller fancies himself as a propaganda genius and he certainly has had his successes. The speech he wrote for January 6 almost got Mike Pence killed, after all!

But something that has happened with immigration has undercut Miller's normal propaganda success on his most cherished issue (in reality, as I'll show, Miller has serially failed with immigration, but succeeded wildly last year).

I've written and spoken about the import of mob trolls to Trump's political rise. Stephen Miller has been central in that use of trolling. Democrats have utterly failed to respond functionally, usually leaving them unable to reach broad swaths of disaffected Americans or counter extremist pro-Trump propaganda like Miller's.

Miller's propaganda strategy to boost ICE has played to some of that:

- Non-stop DHS posts – almost all full of lies – that focus on the few spectacular cases of migrant crime in attempt to brand all migrants with the crimes of

a few (ironically, Alex Padilla was calling out this strategy when Kristi Noem's goons assaulted him)

- An attempt, which has largely flopped, to brand ICE squads in spectacle or to set up spectacular events (like the invasion of McArthur Park in Los Angeles, which looked ridiculous)
- The use of troll mobs and right wing propagandist ride-alongs to eroticize ICE patrols in cities
- The attempt to brand Democrats as pro-crime

As noted, several of these efforts have largely failed. The ICE spectacle, often featuring Kristi Noem as the figurehead, often look ridiculous and have repeatedly led to blowback (such as her staged visit to CECOT or a recent Chicago raid that resulted in the detention of two American citizens, along with some others). The attempt to eroticize ICE raids often looks pathetic.

Meanwhile, while Miller attempts to create spectacle to eroticize ICE goons, bystanders continue to capture his goons rolling around on the ground violently abusing people, and in this particular case, desperately losing his gun. They capture people shaming ICE agents. A latest video shows a food delivery guy riding away after 8 heavily armed men chased him for saying something. And those – not Miller's fancy new trucks – are what go viral on social media.

Those viral posts are not the only reporting that makes Miller's goons unpopular. There

really is a lot of good individual reporting on the individual stories of people sucked up in the dragnet, the kind of persistence that enabled Abrego and the Venezuelan concentration camp deportees to reach broader political salience (and with it, political headaches for Trump). Legal reporting makes the larger system visible and magnifies outcomes. While journalism is hollowed out, both the rising outlets and traditional media are still telling this story well, often persisting with the stories of individuals sucked up in the ICE dragnets that emphasizes their humanity and reveals their legal outcome. And there are some exceptional journalists at outlets we've long given up on.

There are, to be sure, some wraparound policy issues that the Democratic Party needs to push better, focusing on the way that Miller's ICE raids have contributed to housing market problems and food inflation, or visualizing what government could be spending all the money wasted on ICE, for example. There are some NGOs and, especially, policy work from CATO that should be magnified (this was actually something Pramala Jayapal did in a recent shadow hearing).

But all of it starts from the people – both private citizens and independent journalists – witnessing, filming, and posting ICE thugs. They not only create an inexcusably endless supply of new stories of abuse to expose, but they fill the social media space Miller would prefer to fill with staged ICE spectacle. Rather than eroticized violence, what gets seen is spectacle that makes his goons look fat, incompetent, and pathetic.

Butt cracks and beer bellies.

The spectacle Miller's poorly-trained goons have created has filled the media space he would otherwise fill with staged brown person domination porn.

None of this solves the political problem of a fascist building power off the demonization of immigrants. But the unpopularity of it creates

political opportunities.

So it's worth mapping out what combination of mobile witness and compelling journalism has made that possible.