**Himes’ reticence on immigration is the right strategy**

On May 14, Jared Kushner and Stephen Miller presented to the Senate GOP the White House’s newest plan to tackle immigration. With mixed, mostly lukewarm reactions from the Senators, the plan is unlikely to get much media coverage or attention from lawmakers. Unlike much of the public conversation around immigration, though, the proposal is somewhat wonky in its restructuring of the process for legally entering the country. In contrast, an immense proportion of recent political and media *attention* on the topic has been devoted to two kinds of immigrants: DREAMers and migrant camp detainees. While obviously important, the narrow focus on these two issues in particular has contributed to the ongoing trend of making *Latinx* and *Spanish-speaking* synonymous with *immigrant*, especially in media environments with a shorter attention span.As dialogue around immigration has simplified and racialized, politicians not in search of cheap points have remained relatively quiet on the subject, choosing instead to address the nation’s policies from a substantive angle, and engaging with stakeholders instead of pundits. Our U.S. Representative Jim Himes has done just that; voters should thank him for it, and other Democrats should take note.

Racial rhetoric can be toxic, but it is good politics: experimental [work](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1948550617712029) from Maureen Craig and Jennifer Richeson, as well as Daniel Hopkins’ “Politicized Places” [hypothesis](https://www.uh.edu/honors/undergraduate-research/scholarships/houston-scholars/programming/reading-materials/fall-2015-immigration/3B_Politicized%20Places%20Full%20Text.pdf), finds that an increase in the salience of Latino influx causes white voters to be more conservative. No wonder GOP politicians talk about the scourge illegal alien crime. As much as they might reasonably care about individual victims or the principle of a strong border, it is simply a fact that retweeting to constituents scary pictures of Latino murderers with face tattoos who entered the country illegally will tilt the scales in Republicans’ favor. Not to conflate the entire party with its right wing, but a short perusal of Breitbart’s immigration headlines will show that this rhetorical style is not uncommon.

Unfortunately, the racialization of immigration in the public eye has been unfolding for a long time. News about the topic has disproportionately focused on undocumented Latinos, and it has been increasingly negative. Analysis of *The* *New York Times* since 1982 by Marisa Abrajano and Zoltan Hajnal in their [book](https://princeton.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.23943/princeton/9780691164434.001.0001/upso-9780691164434) *White Backlash*, as well as a Brookings and Norman Lear Center [report](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/0925_immigration_dionne.pdf) from 2008, document these trends systematically. They certainly have downstream consequences for voters’ perceptions and preferences: existing psychological research suggests that public opinion is to a large extent top-down, meaning politicians and media outlets determine what is relevant to voters by “setting the agenda.” While Trump’s brand of scapegoating immigrants is new in some ways, its associated racial animus has been enabled by persistently non-representative media coverage of immigrants. The citizenry is guilty, too. Work by Natalie Rojas and Bradford Jones at UC Davis has shown that Americans tend to overestimate the number of undocumented immigrants, and that white Americans do not differentiate between the various Latin American nationalities.

The general unrepresentativeness of political rhetoric and media coverage of immigration is not necessarily a bad thing on its face. Illegal immigration is more newsworthy in some ways, and Latin Americans constitute a plurality (44%) of all immigrants and a majority (67%) of all illegal immigrants, per the [Migration Policy Center](https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states). However, the media’s failure to talk about Europeans, or East and South Asians entering the country, inadvertently pushes the Latino threat narrative, making whites more conservative and hurting Democratic causes.

Democratic politicians should *not* change their tune as immigration continues to become more racialized, but instead should engage with immigration policy from a substantive angle, through stakeholders rather than the media. This denies the GOP the racial salience that motivates white backlash, and asks instead which policies lead to which outcomes. CT-4’s Jim Himes is a good example. First of all, both his [website’s](https://himes.house.gov/immigration-depth) immigration platform and his limited public comments show his commitment to represent our district’s interests. Himes wants a path to legality for undocumented immigrants, so that they can better integrate into society and pay much-needed taxes. He wants to increase skilled labor, family, and refugee allotment along with securing the border. This generally reflects CT-4’s demographics and politics; it is a light-blue district without a serious employment threat from skilled foreign workers (read: tech). Second, Connecticut has its share of immigrants and associated advocacy groups. Himes engages with these stakeholders, for example CIRI-CT and Building One Community in a town hall last year, at least as much as he makes media appeals on the topic. Importantly, his public language on immigration is *general* and *not racially valenced,* dealing straightforwardly instead with the substance of each subset of immigration policy. His rhetoric has not evolved in tone since taking office, unlike some of his left-wing colleagues and much of the Republican party.

Immigration policymaking is ultimately a set of simple but difficult questions about whom to let in and in what capacity. It is easy for partisans to revert to cheap criticisms of our current immigration system, as it sells well on cable news and Twitter, but such criticism usually plays into the oversimplified and racialized meta-narrative increasingly (and often unwittingly) pushed by the media and conservative politicians. Rather than wade into these toxic waters, Democrats should follow the example of Himes and colleagues like him, who choose to serve their constituency instead of seeking attention.

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