

IMMIGRATION

Build the Front Door

A legal system so fast, generous, and functional that walking through it beats going around it, paired with a border that can actually do its job.

PILLAR 8 · HUMANE SAFETY, JUSTICE, AND IMMIGRATION**AT A GLANCE****The problem**

A 3.2 million-case court backlog and legal channels mismatched to the labor market, with exploitation profitable.

The proposal

Build the front door: funded courts, right-sized legal channels, enforcement aimed at the wage floor.

Cost & funding

Court and processing capacity up front; returns in order, wages, and growth.

Evidence strength

Strong on backlog and wage-penalty data; the political sequencing is a bet, and the brief says so.

Principal risk

Wage effects if floor enforcement fails; the package failing politically while its pieces could pass.

Success looks like

Backlog measured in months, not years; wage-floor cases actually enforced.

Summary

No person is illegal, and a country still needs a working front door. Those two ideas are not in tension. They only seem to be because we have spent decades treating the border as a moral wall to either defend or tear down, when the honest way to think about it is a door. The question is not whether the door should exist. The question is whether it works, and right now it does not: the legal way in is so slow, so arbitrary, and so expensive that doing it the right way can take a decade or more, which pushes people toward the only options left and then punishes them for taking them.

This brief proposes seven planks that build a working front door: legalize the people already here, because the evidence from 1986 says it lifts wages rather than lowering them; open the legal channels wide and clear the backlog; de-indenture guest work instead of just opposing it; check illegal hiring in a way that routes people to the legal door; restructure enforcement into an accountable civil agency; manage the border by capacity, not cruelty; and open national service as a route to citizenship. It stages the work honestly across a first term, a decade, and an end state, and it is built where the public actually is: bipartisan majorities in every swing state favor the whole package¹ at once.

The Principle

Start with the thing most immigration arguments refuse to say plainly. No person is illegal, and a country still needs a working front door. Those two ideas are not in tension. They only seem to be because we have spent decades treating the border as a moral wall to either defend or tear down, when the honest way to think about it is a door. The question is not whether the door should exist. The question is whether it works.

Right now it does not. The legal way in is so slow, so arbitrary, and so expensive that doing it the right way can take a decade or more, which pushes people toward the only options left and then punishes them for taking them. So the standard this project holds is simple. Immigration should be lawful, fast, humane, and capable. Make the legal door work so well that walking through it is easier than going around it, and the border stops being a cruel bottleneck and becomes what it should be, an ordinary formality that almost everyone can satisfy.

That is the whole move. Inclusion delivered through a system that works, not inclusion won by abolishing the system. Cruelty is not order. Chaos is not compassion. And rights require delivery systems, which means a right to come here legally requires a system that can process a human being in months, not a decade.

The System Failure

The legal system fails coming and going. It is buried first: more than three million cases sit in immigration court,² and roughly eleven million applications are pending at the processing agency³, with people waiting years just to be told their paperwork was received. On top of the backlog sits a set of caps written for a country that no longer exists. Employment green cards are held at 140,000 a year⁴, a number set decades ago, and a per-country rule limiting any single nation to about seven percent of green cards forces applicants from high-demand countries like India, Mexico, and the Philippines to wait a decade or more even after they qualify. This is manufactured scarcity, the same artificial shortage this platform takes apart in housing, written into immigration law.

Enforcement fails the other direction. It lurches between neglect and cruelty, with raids and detention that traumatize families and communities and offend basic decency, often without making the country any safer or the system any more orderly. And underneath all of it, the exploitation vector almost no one names: the deportable worker. An unauthorized worker carries a wage penalty of roughly 14 to 24 percent compared to a legal worker doing the same job, because a person who can be turned in can be underpaid, and an employer who can threaten deportation can hold the whole floor down, for citizens and immigrants alike. The wage pressure people blame on immigrants is mostly a product of illegality, not of the person.

None of this is order, and none of it is compassion. It is a system failing on its own terms.

The Proposal

The destination is a working front door. Seven planks build it.

1. **Legalize the people already here, and go big, because the evidence says it lifts wages rather than lowering them.** When the 1986 reform legalized roughly 2.7 million people⁵, the studies that followed found the effect ran the direction restrictionists deny: legalization raised wages, both for the legalized⁶ and by removing the deportability discount that dragged down everyone competing at that level. The legalized themselves saw real gains, moved out of poverty, finished school, and bought homes. Do it again through an earned path: time in the country, work, taxes, a clean record, plus updating the decades-frozen registry already in immigration law and protecting people brought here as children. A permanent shadow population that works and pays taxes but cannot belong serves no one.

2. **Open the legal channels wide, and clear the backlog that strangles them.** Raise the employment caps to match real labor demand, reform or end the per-country limits, and build legal pathways for the work the economy actually needs. Fund and staff the courts and the processing agency to clear the backlog, set firm timelines, and modernize the systems, so that doing it the right way is possible in months instead of years. Every improvement to the legal door reduces the pressure on the border, because the more the front door works, the less anyone has reason to go around it.
3. **De-indenture guest work instead of just opposing it.** The old labor objection to guest-worker programs has a real grievance underneath it, but it aims at the wrong target. The exploitation is not the temporary worker. It is the tie: a visa bound to a single employer strips a worker of the power to walk, which lets wages get undercut. So the fix is not to shrink the channel, it is to make it portable and rights-bearing. Let guest workers change employers, set a real wage floor, and give them the right to organize. That answers the labor concern honestly without the protectionism that just raises costs and pushes hiring back into the shadows.
4. **Check illegal hiring in a way that routes people to the legal door rather than deeper into the dark.** The public wants a demand-side check, and they are right that one belongs in any working system. But design matters, because a hiring check imposed on its own tends to push wages down and can invite discrimination against anyone who looks or sounds foreign. So this check only works married to the rest of the plan. When the legal door is wide and fast, a hiring verification system stops trapping people and starts routing them, pushing demand toward legal workers and legal channels instead of the underground. Pair it with real enforcement of labor law, wage theft, safety, and the right to organize, aimed at exploitative employers rather than at workers. That is how you attack wage suppression at its actual source.
5. **Restructure enforcement into an accountable civil agency.** Replace immigration enforcement as it is currently structured with a civil compliance and processing agency built around the rule of law, due process, and oversight, rather than the chaotic apparatus we have now. This is not radical. The system was already reorganized once, in 2003. Enforcement is part of any working system. It does not have to be inhumane to be effective.

6. **Manage the border by capacity, not cruelty.** Staff the border with enough asylum officers and judges to adjudicate claims quickly and fairly, modernize the ports of entry, and address the conditions that drive migration, rather than relying on deterrence through suffering. A country is allowed to decide who comes in. It is not allowed to do it by manufacturing misery. Keep the ability to say no at the edges, and make the process fast and fair enough that most people never need to hear it.
7. **Open national service as a route to citizenship.** Just as military service has long been an earned path to naturalization, a completed term of civilian national service should open one too, tying this pillar to the civic-life agenda in Pillar 9.

Underneath all seven runs the connection to Pillar 7. The one real downside of a more open legal system, pressure on the workers at the very bottom and on the immigrants who arrived just before, is neutralized structurally, not wished away. Sectoral bargaining and a living wage floor mean the gains from immigration cannot be captured by employers at workers' expense. The fear is that expansion happens without worker power. Give workers the power and the fear loses its basis.

Implementation Pathway

The heavy lift, legalization and the expansion of legal channels, runs through Congress, which means the real obstacle is the Senate filibuster, not public opinion. That is the honest bottleneck, and filibuster reform and patient coalition-building are part of the work rather than a footnote. But the planks that buy credibility fastest do not require new law at all. Funding the courts and the processing agency to clear the backlog, restructuring enforcement toward due process, and shifting workplace enforcement onto exploitative employers move through appropriations and executive action and can begin almost immediately.

So the sequence is deliberate. Lead with competence. Clear the backlog, make the system visibly work, restore order to enforcement, and demonstrate that a generous position can be a disciplined one. Bank the public trust that competence earns. Then spend it on the big inclusion bill. Generosity that looks like chaos loses. Generosity that looks like a system working is durable.

The Sequencing Arc

This is a ten-to-twenty-year build, not a first-year bill, and it is honest about that. The trap in immigration is promising the whole thing at once and delivering none of it, so the plan is staged. Each stage earns the next. The point of naming the stages is discipline: you do not skip to the hard part before the ground can hold it, and you do not water down the end state to make it easier to start.

First term: prove the system works. Almost all of this moves through appropriations and executive authority, so none of it waits on sixty Senate votes. Fund and staff the immigration courts and the processing agency and start visibly cutting the backlog. Set firm decision timelines. Begin restructuring enforcement toward a civil, due-process model with real oversight. Shift workplace enforcement onto exploitative employers and stand up serious labor-standards enforcement decoupled from a worker's papers. Protect the people brought here as children administratively while the permanent fix is built. The goal of this term is not the moral victory. It is the credibility. You are proving that a humane position can run an orderly system, because that proof is the currency you spend on everything after it.

Within a decade: pass the legalization and open the legal door. This is the heavy legislative lift, and it needs a rebuilt majority and, realistically, filibuster reform. Enact the earned path to status for the long-settled, updating the frozen registry and making protection for childhood arrivals permanent in law rather than by executive grace. Raise the employment caps, reform or end the per-country limits, and de-indenture guest work by making visas portable and rights-bearing. Pair the wider door with the demand-side hiring check, which only becomes fair once the legal channel is actually wide enough to walk through. Tie national service to a path to citizenship. This is the stage where the front door gets built, and it is timed for when the coalition and the credibility exist to carry it, not before.

End state: a working front door, permanently. The standard the whole pillar drives toward. Legal entry is fast and fair enough that going around it makes no sense for almost anyone. No permanent shadow population. No deportable underclass that employers can exploit to hold wages down. A border managed by capacity rather than cruelty, with the routine ability to decide who enters because the system is trusted to be fair. Immigration status is no longer the thing that determines whether a person can be paid a decent wage or treated with dignity. The door is open, the rules are clear, and the system works. That is the finish line, and every stage before it is chosen because it moves the country closer to it.

Funding and Public-Value Logic

Most of this pays for itself or costs little. Legalization turns off-the-books workers into on-the-books taxpayers, which brings in revenue rather than spending it. The expansion tilted toward higher-skill and permanent immigration is a net fiscal gain, since those immigrants contribute more in taxes than they use in services and their children are among the strongest fiscal contributors in the country. A functioning legal system reduces the enormous costs of a broken one, in detention, in court backlogs, and in the economic loss of pushing willing workers into the shadows.

The one real fiscal cost is honest and worth naming: lower-skill immigration presses on state and local budgets for a long time, mostly through the cost of educating children, before it turns net positive. The answer is not to deny it. It is to offset those costs federally, since the federal government captures most of the tax gains while states and localities carry the near-term expense. A cost acknowledged and shared is a cost you can defend. A cost denied is one your opponents will use against you.

Where the Public Actually Is

This position is not a stretch against public opinion. It is close to the center of it, once you set aside the shouting.

Support for a path to citizenship over mass deportation runs as a solid-to-super majority across essentially every major pollster. In 2025 Quinnipiac measured it 64 to 31, Pew 65 to 34, Fox 59 to 29, and Gallup put support for citizenship for undocumented immigrants at 78 percent. Protecting people brought here as children is close to consensus: Gallup found 85 percent support, including 71 percent of Republicans. Gallup also recorded immigration viewed as a good thing for the country at a record 79 percent, and the share of Americans wanting immigration reduced fell from 55 percent in 2024 to 30 percent in 2025. Mass deportation, meanwhile, is underwater, with majorities saying enforcement has gone too far and opposing the detention of longtime residents who have committed no crime.

The most important finding is that the public does not experience these as trade-offs. In a swing-state study by the Program for Public Consultation, where respondents were briefed with arguments on both sides, bipartisan majorities favored the whole package at once: a path to citizenship over mass deportation, a stronger and more capable border, a check on illegal hiring, and more legal work visas where employers can show real demand. That is the front-door position, and it commands majorities in every swing state, among Republicans and Democrats alike. People are not asking to choose between order and generosity. They are asking for a system that delivers both.

One caution keeps this honest. Part of the recent surge in pro-legalization sentiment is a reaction against heavy-handed enforcement, so some of it will soften as the context shifts. The durable floor is the path-to-citizenship and Dreamer support, which has held for over a decade, and the package finding. Build on those, not on the peak.

Risks and Guardrails

The first risk is being misread as open borders, which is why the front-door frame has to stay explicit: a wide legal door and a border that still works, not the absence of a border. The second is the wage pressure on the bottom, answered by the Pillar 7 labor floor rather than ignored. The third is the state-and-local fiscal cost of lower-skill immigration, answered by federal offset rather than denial. The fourth is that a hiring check, badly designed, backfires into lower wages and discrimination, which is why it is bound to a wide legal channel and to labor-standards enforcement rather than deployed on its own.

The place this position consciously departs from the standard left is guest work and visa expansion. The instinct on the left is to oppose both as wage-suppressing. This brief does not. The evidence says the problem is the employer tie, not the worker, and that permanent, rights-bearing immigration is pro-worker because a legal resident cannot be held over a barrel. That is a considered break, made in the open, not an oversight.

Metrics for Success

Judge the agenda on function, fairness, and outcomes. Legal processing times and the size of the court and application backlogs, tracked toward months rather than years. The share of the long-settled undocumented population moving onto a legal path. Wage outcomes for the legalized and for the lowest-paid workers who compete with new arrivals. Enforcement measured by lawfulness, due process, and public trust rather than by raids and arrests. The number of exploitative-employer labor-law actions, as the real front in wage protection. And the balance of legal-channel capacity against demonstrated labor demand, so the front door is sized to the country's actual needs.

Opposition and Responses

Some will say this is open borders. It is the reverse. This brief calls for a border that works, enforcement that follows the law, a hiring check, and a system fast and fair enough that legal entry beats illegal entry. Open borders and enforcement-by-cruelty are both failures, and this rejects both.

Some will say amnesty just draws more illegal immigration. The historical record says otherwise. The 1986 legalization was followed by a short-run decline in illegal crossings, not a surge, because people who could cross legally stopped sneaking back and forth. And a 2025 study found that reform did not set off runaway chain migration: each legalized person was responsible, in total, for the later legal admission of about one relative, mostly immediate family. The talking point is not supported by the data.

Some will say immigration depresses wages, so legalizing people hurts workers. The wage penalty is a function of illegality, and legalizing people removes it, which lifts the floor. Any downward pressure from new supply is small at the aggregate level, concentrated at the very bottom, and answered directly by the labor-power agenda in Pillar 7. The way to protect workers is legal status plus bargaining power, not a deportable underclass that employers can exploit.

Some will say more visas will undercut American workers. Not if the channel is permanent and rights-bearing and the wage floor holds. The exploitation comes from tying a worker to one employer, not from the worker's presence. De-indenture the visa and it becomes what it should be, a legal worker with full rights, which is the opposite of a wage weapon.

Some will say we are soft on the border. The border in this plan is more capable than the one we have, with enough officers and judges to decide claims quickly, modern ports of entry, and a retained ability to say no. What it abandons is deterrence through suffering, which is cruelty that does not even deliver order.

What Would Change Our Position

The front door rests on a bet that enforcement aimed at the wage floor protects everyone; if expanded legal channels produced measurable wage depression for American workers despite that enforcement, channel sizing and labor standards would tighten, because the coalition for a working system collapses the moment it becomes a subsidy for cheap labor. If surge funding for the courts failed to cut the backlog, the fix is deeper than dockets and the plank would say so. And the split-the-package question is a standing falsifier: if the package framing repeatedly fails politically while its pieces poll and pass separately, the platform re-sequences rather than riding the package down.

Public-Facing Language

Here is the short version. No person is illegal, and a country still needs a working front door. Right now that door is broken. The legal way in can take a decade, which pushes people to go around it, and then we punish them for going around it. So build the door. Make it fast, make it fair, and make it wide enough that almost everyone can walk through it legally. Give the people who have already built their lives here a way to earn their place, because legalizing them lifts wages and brings them out of the shadows. Go after the bosses who exploit deportable workers, not the workers. And keep a border that can do its job, managed by competence instead of cruelty. Cruelty is not order. Chaos is not compassion. We can build a front door good enough to be both generous and orderly, and most Americans already want us to.

SOURCES

1. UMD Program for Public Consultation, six-swing-state immigration survey ↵
2. TRAC (Syracuse University), Immigration Court Backlog Tool ↵

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4. State Department Visa Bulletin: statutory employment-based caps and per-country limits ↩
5. Library of Congress research guide on the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act ↩
6. Kossoudji & Cobb-Clark, wage effects of IRCA legalization, Journal of Labor Economics (2002) ↩