

# Newsweek

## More 2018 Candidates are Calling to Abolish ICE Under President Trump

Marie Solis

April 6, 2018

When Randy Bryce first heard some of his fellow 2018 candidates calling to abolish U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), he thought it a somewhat radical position. But then he thought about it some more. No, he realized, abolishing an agency that has only been in existence for the last 15 years—especially one he saw as responsible for breaking families apart and instilling fear in immigrant communities—wasn't that radical at all.

Bryce, who's challenging House Speaker Paul Ryan in Wisconsin's 1st District, announced his platform on the agency earlier this week, becoming at least the 13th congressional contender to call for its elimination. Just a year ago, such a suggestion might have been deemed fringe or too far left for a viable candidate to reasonably propose. But as ICE arrests surge under President Donald Trump's "America First" agenda, the stance has become appealing to an incoming class of progressives that hopes to get the rest of the Democratic Party on board.

"ICE has grown power-hungry, sucking up more and more federal resources and directing them toward the deportation of children and families who have lived here for years and who are otherwise completely law-abiding," Bryce told *Newsweek* on Thursday. "I think that ICE should be abolished and Congress should explore which existing agency could best house immigration and customs enforcement, so that only those who pose a true threat to our country's security face deportation."

That Bryce has moved toward this position is a good sign for the nascent movement to abolish ICE: Bryce is a Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee-backed candidate who raised \$2.1 million in the last quarter, almost guaranteeing him a win over his primary opponent Cathy Myers, who's only raised about \$264,000. In other words, the 2018 midterm races will likely see at least one candidate on the general election ballot who supports abolishing ICE.

"Every time we have a candidate like this step out and say 'abolish ICE,' it's one more piece of evidence that this movement has momentum," Sean McElwee, a researcher and former policy analyst at Demos, a progressive think tank based in New York, told *Newsweek*. "Serious DCCC-endorsed candidates believe this issue should be taken seriously and be discussed and debated in their races."

From the Democrats' point of view, there's a lot to discuss. ICE is an agency within the Department of Homeland Security made up of some 20,000 employees that receives roughly \$6 billion in funding every year. In 2018, the Trump administration requested nearly \$8 billion for the agency. In February, Trump sought to expand ICE, requesting money to hire 2,000 new agents who would work toward the administration's goal of targeting undocumented immigrants in the United States for arrest and eventual deportation.

Since Trump took office, ICE has detained immigrants who were dropping their children off at school or showing up for the regular check-ins the agency required of them. In other cases, ICE deported longtime residents of the U.S., like a Michigan father who came to the country 30 years ago.

Those stories have incited calls to not just reform the agency but to eliminate it completely, a sort of progressive take on Republicans' past calls to abolish the Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Education or Internal Revenue Service.

Most of the candidates calling to eliminate ICE so far are vying to unseat Democratic incumbents in solidly blue districts, many of which have significant immigrant populations. There is also one Republican, Marc Whitmire, who wants to beat Republican incumbent John Duncan in Tennessee's 2nd District.

Their stance on ICE and immigration reform has exposed an emerging divide within the Democratic Party: between establishment Democrats who prefer to take a more measured stance on immigration, and their challengers, who think it's time for elected officials to show what they call "moral courage."

"We've proposed ideas that would have been taboo a few years ago here in Indiana—abolishing ICE, single-payer healthcare, a guaranteed jobs program, legalization of marijuana, reparations, etcetera—and people are responding," Indiana House candidate Dan Canon, who was reportedly the first 2018 congressional candidate to call for abolishing ICE, told *Newsweek*. In Indiana's 9th District, where Canon is running to flip the seat from red to blue, Hispanic or Latino residents make up just over 3 percent of the population.

"If we can do it here in Indiana, I have a hard time seeing why candidates in safe blue districts aren't talking about the same things," Canon said.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a first-time female candidate in New York's 14th District, which is comprised of almost 50 percent Hispanic or Latino residents, made her call to abolish ICE around the same time as Canon, and said she began to see the effects it had on the broader national conversation almost immediately. Ocasio-Cortez said it was shortly after tuning in to MSNBC to watch Chris Hayes ask Senator Kamala Harris (D-Calif.) whether she thought ICE should continue to exist. When Harris said yes, she drew ire from outlets like *Splinter*, which declared, "Not Good Enough, Kamala Harris," and *The Washington Post*, where an opinion columnist wrote in response: "ICE Deserves to Be Abolished."

"Now she's in the hot seat on the issue," Ocasio-Cortez told *Newsweek* of the rumored 2020 presidential candidate. "2018 is a remarkable opportunity not just to swing certain red districts

blue, but to bring much more clarity to the Democratic Party, change the guard and champion the messages working-class Americans have been waiting for.”

Those who share Ocasio-Cortez's view are growing in number, but there's still a vocal majority of people who find her vision for immigration reform far-fetched.

“It would not be remotely feasible to abolish ICE,” Matt O’Brien, the current director of research at FAIR, a conservative immigration policy nonprofit, and a former assistant chief counsel with ICE, told *Newsweek* by email. “ICE plays a major role in protecting public safety and ensuring national security. Abolishing it would mean eliminating a key tool for removing criminals and terrorists from the United States.”

Chris Martin, a National Republican Congressional Committee spokesman, called Bryce’s calls to abolish ICE a “radical proposal” that would be “completely out of touch with Main Street, Wisconsin.

“ICE plays a vital role in fighting deadly gangs, preventing terrorism and ending sex-trafficking operations,” Martin elaborated.

Candidates with anti-ICE platforms, however, say they can easily imagine a country without ICE—after all, before 2003, it didn't exist at all. President George W. Bush’s administration established the agency in response to the 9/11 attacks as part of a suite of national security legislation and policy that included the Homeland Security Act and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security. The same day the U.S. government launched ICE, it shuttered the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), which operated under the purview of the Department of Justice. Government officials transferred its operations to the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), U.S. Customs and Border Protection and ICE.

In the absence of ICE, candidates like Florida House candidate Chardo Richardson imagine putting ICE funds toward the creation of an independent, nonpartisan immigration agency that takes a more “humane” approach to undocumented immigrants in the U.S.

Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a D.C.-based libertarian think tank, told *Newsweek* that federal resources could be reshuffled to other immigration enforcement branches, which would only deal with undocumented immigrants who’d been convicted of violent crimes.

“Any American who’s concerned with due process should be concerned with ICE,” Ocasio-Cortez said. “Calling to abolish ICE is less radical than the establishment of ICE in the first place.”