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## Agency Entrenchment: Sociological Legitimacy in a Politically Contested Occupation

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### Abstract

This study investigates how agents in contested occupations justify and legitimize their work. It examines Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) attorneys who prosecute immigrant removal cases on behalf of the federal government, delving into the narrative strategies that attorneys use to attain self-legitimacy within the agency. While existing literature suggests that self-legitimacy stems from either public support or an intrinsic belief in one's deservingness of power, this study introduces a third pathway to self-legitimacy, *agency entrenchment*, in which government prosecutors draw on a highly internalized sense of patriotism and a duty to their organizational role, in the face of heightened public protest and changing administrative priorities. Analyzing forty in-depth interviews with ICE attorneys, this study identifies two primary approaches to agency entrenchment. The first is a bureaucratic approach, in which attorneys derive an internalized sense of duty from the existing law. The second is an enforcement approach, in which attorneys derive moral authority from what they see as their protector status. By deploying these narratives of self-legitimacy, ICE prosecutors attempt to resolve perceived conflicts between their legally mandated responsibilities and the ethical and reputational criticisms they encounter. The findings contribute to the broader understanding of the occupational dynamics between political polarization and law enforcement prosecution.

**Keywords:** Immigration; legitimacy; enforcement

*We have frequent protests outside our building. We had one of the Occupy movements, people living in tents outside our building for days. I came into work one morning and “Fuck ICE” was spray painted on the wall of our building. It’s a federal courthouse, mind you, we are not the only tenants. And it’s just like, this is where I work. The negative press has really taken a toll on us [over the last five years]. We’ve just been completely vilified.*

*Attorney for Immigration and Customs Enforcement*

## Introduction

Immigration and its enforcement have emerged as paramount global issues in the modern era, commanding massive political attention and debate. In the United States, the heart of this complex political issue is a multi-agency immigration enforcement apparatus that processes noncitizens' admission into and removal from the United States. The removal of noncitizens is litigated by federal government attorneys who are employed by the Office of the Principal Legal Advisor (OPLA), a sub-office of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Like their prosecutorial counterparts in the criminal legal system, ICE attorneys are tasked with defending the government's interests, which often means aggressively litigating the removal of noncitizens.

US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is a relatively new federal agency whose mission focuses on managing national security through criminal investigations and the enforcement of civil immigration law.<sup>1</sup> Created under the Homeland Security Act in 2003 as part of the Department of Homeland Security, the agency has experienced exceptional growth in the past two decades (Hadzhidimova 2023). With an annual budget of approximately eight billion dollars (US) in 2024, ICE has more than 20,000 law enforcement and support employees in more than 400 offices across three operational divisions: Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO), and the Office of the Principal Legal Advisor (OPLA) (ICE Annual Report 2023). As part of these operations, the agency has exponentially increased the arrests, detention, and removal of noncitizens from the United States through a complex and multilayered system of federal and sub-federal surveillance, collaboration, enforcement, and litigation (TRAC).

Against the backdrop of highly racialized and controversial immigration enforcement policies (Chacón and Coutin 2018; Golash-Boza 2016), ICE has become hyper-visible, attracting multiple challenges to its legitimacy in recent years. As with many other law enforcement agencies, the federal agency has come under fire in recent years: immigration advocates have called to defund, abolish, or “melt” ICE due to the agency's continued policies of family separation and deportation, while others have called for even more aggressive border control and security efforts from the agency. The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), representing ICE officers, formally “disclaimed interest” in the ICE bargaining unit, citing ideological differences (Wagner 2022). National polling found that ICE was one of the least popular government agencies, albeit along a sharply partisan divide.<sup>2</sup> Notably, while left-leaning politicians have often denounced the agency's actions, the agency has strong support from most Republican voters and saw a more than \$200 million increase in overall funding under the centrist Biden administration (Reichlin-Melnick 2022).

Amid the heightened political polarization of immigration, this article investigates the experiences and strategies of government prosecutors responsible for ongoing immigrant removal litigation. As prosecutorial bureaucrats, ICE attorneys fulfill their

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<sup>1</sup> The agency's mission is to “[p]rotect America through criminal investigations and enforcing immigration laws to preserve national security and public safety” (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> The movement gained mainstream traction in the United States in mid-2018, with thousands of protests taking place over several months (K. R. Johnson 2021). The poll found that 72 percent of Democrats hold an unfavorable view of the agency, while 70 percent of Republicans were found to have a favorable opinion of the agency (Pew Research Center 2019).

legally mandated duties as state representatives, yet less is known about how they navigate the challenges arising from the politically contested nature of their enforcement work. This research examines the narratives ICE attorneys construct, exploring the ways they legitimize their work and manage the intricate interplay between reputational and occupational tensions within this charged agency context.

ICE attorneys occupy a unique occupational position compared to other federal law enforcement agents. Highly educated and well-paid, these attorneys are often longtime civil bureaucrats who wield a significant amount of discretion and influence in the courtroom as prosecutors (Wadhia 2009). Additionally, these government attorneys are demographically dissimilar from the field agents for ICE and border patrol, who are predominantly male and Latino (Vega 2018). Recent agency statistics show that these ICE attorneys are predominantly white, female, and largely identify as Democrats or Independents (Office of the Principal Legal Advisor 2022). Given this context, this study focuses on these federal law enforcement agents and the self-legitimacy narratives they use to make sense of and justify their work in the face of political contestation.<sup>3</sup>

The broader study of legitimacy has long been concerned with how the public perceives the legitimacy of powerholders, including law enforcement agents (T. R. Tyler 2003). However, equally important to the framework of legitimacy is how powerholders themselves understand the work they do and derive an internal sense of self-legitimacy (Bottoms and Tankebe 2012). A small but growing body of work has begun to illuminate how other types of attorneys and immigration enforcement agents enter into and think about their work, from criminal prosecutors (Cox and Gripp 2021), front-line police officers (Armenta 2017), border patrol (Vega 2018), ICE's Enforcement and Removal Operations Agents (ERO) (Cortez 2020), to detention officers (Puthoopparambil, Ahlberg, and Bjerneld 2015). From this important research, we know that many field agents find a sense of self-legitimacy from narratives of moral authority in co-ethnic compassion (Vega 2018), or from a dispassionate approach in enforcing the law (Armenta 2019; Bosworth 2019), yet less is known about the empirical case of ICE's prosecutors, as these federal employees have not yet been studied in-depth.

To investigate the case of ICE attorneys, I examine the self-legitimation narratives of ICE attorneys who litigate immigrant removal cases on behalf of the federal government. Drawing on forty in-depth interviews with ICE attorneys, I identify two distinct narrative approaches: bureaucratic and enforcement. The bureaucratic approach is characterized by a distanced, professional attitude toward the work of immigration enforcement. This attitude enables agents to maintain either a *respectability narrative*, where they evaluate themselves based on their civility towards respondents, or a *victimhood narrative*, where they see themselves unjustly targeted by pro-immigration activists and politicians. By contrast, the enforcement approach is characterized by a moralistic, patriotic attitude toward the work of removal litigation. This attitude allows agents to maintain either a *nativist narrative*, in

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<sup>3</sup> Due to the heightened nature of the political polarization in this occupational field, I contend that the work of immigration law enforcement is a form of contested labor. In response to recent calls to investigate the "villains" of policy rather than the "victims," and the "actions of those who benefit from the social construction and political manufacture of immigration crises when none really exist" (Massey 2015:279; Johnson, Dowd, and Ridgeway 2006; Prasad 2018; Vega 2018)).

which attorneys see themselves as heroes protecting the nation from threats, or a *criminalization narrative*, in which attorneys see widespread indicia of fraud and criminality in the immigration claims they are litigating. Taken together, these two approaches make up what I term agency entrenchment, through which agents find self-legitimacy. Conceptually, agency entrenchment identifies a self-legitimacy pathway for ICE attorneys that is rooted within the agency itself. Agency entrenchment demonstrates how agency culture serves as a protective shield against external pressures for individual attorneys, providing a buffer against criticism and fostering internal cohesion. It involves both an unthinking internalization of duty (Arendt 1964) and political entrenchment in anti-immigrant ideology (Levinson and Sachs 2015), both of which insulate against external criticisms of the current immigration enforcement regime. Agency entrenchment provides a salient pathway for relieving the tensions of these prosecutors' occupational self-concept. Crucially, it underscores the pivotal role played by the interaction between the micro-level (individual agency members) and the meso-level (agency culture and dynamics) as the agency and its employees seek endurance and adaptability in an ever-changing policy landscape.

By delving into the complexities these attorneys face, this study offers insights into how law enforcement responds to critique, as it sheds light on how agents and agencies navigate challenges to their legitimacy and authority. Ultimately, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how an actor's legitimizing narratives align with the agency's mission in different ways to advance law enforcement interests.

### Self-legitimacy pathways

In its broadest conceptualization, legitimacy signifies that a legal authority (politician, law enforcement agent, bureaucrat, attorney) acts in accordance with the norms and values of a group (Weber 1978; Zelditch 2001). In studies of law enforcement, legitimacy typically refers to how the public perceives the actions of powerholders, including police officers (T. R. Tyler 2006).<sup>4</sup> However, Bottoms and Tankebe (2012) argue that legitimacy arises from negotiations *between* the public and powerholders, such as prosecutors and police officers (Offit 2019). In these negotiations, powerholders make a claim to regulate the moral social order, which is either affirmed or denied by the public. As such, negotiations require both the public's "audience legitimacy,"<sup>5</sup> as well as the equally important legitimacy derived from the officers' own views on their role or self-legitimacy.

Several nascent theories have been put forth to explain sources of officers' sense of self-legitimacy: public support or internal deservingness. According to Bottoms and Tankebe (2012), officers have a fundamental need to believe that they have the legitimate right to hold power, and self-legitimacy is thus a key pillar of their occupational identity (Bradford and Quinton 2014). On the one hand, self-legitimacy is thought to derive largely

<sup>4</sup> Scholars find that the public is more likely to support (T. R. Tyler 2006), follow (Reisig, Tankebe, and Mesko 2014), and cooperate (T. Tyler and Fagan 2008) the law if they perceive the legal authority to be more legitimate.

<sup>5</sup> Audience legitimacy refers to whether and how the public perceives powerholders to be warranted authority figures. For a broader discussion of audience legitimacy and procedural justice also see (Sunshine and Tyler 2003; Gau 2014).

from a sense that the public supports the officers' work (Justice Tankebe and Meško 2015). Scholars have shown that a significant aspect of self-legitimacy among officers is the belief that their enforcement occurs within a just legal system and that they are carrying out the neutral application of existing laws (Bradford and Quinton 2014; Jackson et al. 2013). In the face of public opposition to law enforcement or negative media portrayals, officers are said to report a diminished internal sense of legitimacy and moral authority (Nix and Wolfe 2015; Trinkner, Tyler, and Goff 2016)

On the other hand, scholars have also identified some officers' self-legitimacy as originating from an internal sense of authority, or deservingness to hold power (Barker 2001). In this formulation, the powerholder justifies their authority through a self-assessment that they are uniquely qualified to hold power and authority, even without validation from the public. Bradford and Quinton argue that "[the] police may gain legitimacy from the idea that they are different and apart from others in society . . . [the] police have a legal duty, and a right, to enforce the law 'without fear or favor' irrespective of public approval" (2014, 1028). For officers in an enforcement system, these two forms of self-legitimacy construct the work of formal social control as both morally and legally appropriate. Given the importance of these nascent self-legitimacy pathways, this article aims to link self-legitimacy pathways with what is known about how law enforcement agents and bureaucrats, and how they think about and understand their occupational roles (Tankebe 2010). Given the uneven moral and political opposition that state agents face, the social psychological narratives they use to justify their work are understudied, yet are a crucial component to understand how they legitimize their work.

### **Making sense of enforcement work**

While there is some initial knowledge about the pathways to how powerholders construct self-legitimacy, a closer analysis of how attorneys and agents make sense of their work provides insight into the legitimizing narratives of ICE attorneys. Scholars have examined the ways that prosecutors seek to justify their decision-making practices, focusing primarily on issues of prosecutorial discretion and charging decisions. Frohmann (1991) found that prosecutors focus on conviction rates, developing typologies of credible victims in sexual assault and rape cases. Spohn et al. (2000) extended this work, finding a wider range of "focal concerns" that prosecutors draw from in making their charging decisions in sexual assault cases. More recently, Cox and Gripp (2021) analyze how progressive prosecutors assert their moral authority while downplaying their role in perpetuating systemic harms, contributing to the ongoing discourse on the positioning of attorneys within the broader socio-political landscape.

Focusing on immigration enforcement, there has been an uptick in the number of studies focusing on why immigration agents work in immigration and how they make sense of the work they do, locating their labor within the institutions for which they work (Dowling and Inda 2013; Ellermann 2005; Vega 2019). To my knowledge, there have not been any other studies of ICE attorneys. However, there have been a number of studies focusing on other types of immigration decision-makers, including immigration judges (Farrell-Bryan 2022; Asad 2019), removal defense attorneys (Crooke 2023), and other front-line immigration enforcement agents (Armenta and Alvarez 2017; Vega 2018; Cortez 2017). As front-line immigration agents grapple with the dissonance of outside

criticism and internal mandates to enforce restrictionist immigration policy (Ellermann 2009; Bosworth and Kellezi 2017), research outlines several different social-psychological approaches that immigration agents, whether on the border, overseeing detention centers, or making arrests, use to bridge the legitimacy gap.

First, immigration enforcement agents frequently articulate narratives of rational, emotional neutrality in which they construct their activities as emotionless, objective, and rational (Bosworth 2019; Ugelvik 2016). The process of affect repression is one tool to ensure the smooth functioning of an emotionally difficult job (Harkin 2015; Waddington 1998). In the case of immigrant detention center staff, scholars show that officers take an emotionally neutral or withdrawn stance in doing their jobs (Bosworth 2019). Similar findings were found for front-line police officers, who see their role as objective administrators who are responsible solely for identifying and processing immigrants for removal, but not responsible for the subsequent removal of those very immigrants (Armenta 2019). By contrast, some scholars argue that some immigration agents lean into an affective stance to manage the contested work of immigration policy implementation. This can range from a perspective of compassion (Vega 2018), guilt at processing minor arrests as removals, or pride at identifying “criminal aliens” (Macias-Rojas 2016).

Second, some immigration field agents employ distancing strategies, from economic explanations for entering into immigration enforcement work (Cortez 2020) to using extensive paperwork (Borrelli and Lindberg 2019) that attempts to legitimize the violence of deportation. Others attempt to transfer the legitimacy gained from removing socially “undesirable” individuals such as terrorists and criminals to offset their work removing socially “deserving” individuals such as political activists or individuals who were brought to the US as children by their parents (Bigo 2002). Still, others take a more wholesale approach to criminalization (Bosworth and Kaufman 2013; Ugelvik 2016), characterizing all the immigrants they work with as criminal and dangerous (Bosworth and Turnbull 2015; Hiemstra 2014), or disputing their morality as criminal and uncertain (Correa 2011; Godsey 2019).

Given this important work on the self-legitimacy strategies of front-line attorneys, field agents, and detention center staff, this article interrogates if and how these approaches to legitimacy operate in the case of immigration prosecutors. While we have a growing knowledge about how field enforcement agents think about the work they do, less is known about the self-legitimacy strategies of prosecutorial bureaucrats who wield coercive force as a function of their occupations. Therefore, by examining how enforcement attorneys construct self-legitimacy in removal litigation, we gain a better understanding of the narrative response of career bureaucrats to political contestation.

Finally, although the broader ideologies of agency mission and racialization are outside the primary focus of this paper, these two core frameworks undergird this study. Specifically, organizations must uphold a sense of purpose and relevance to ensure their continued existence amidst evolving challenges. This imperative is particularly salient for government institutions that maintain their authority and credibility through annual appropriations and legislative support. Such processes involve concerted efforts to justify their actions, policies, and existence in the eyes of the public and other stakeholders. Although this paper focuses on the dynamics of

occupational and work identity here, racial dynamics are implicated throughout these narratives and in the agency's enforcement project.

### Data and methods

This article is based on forty in-depth, semi-structured interviews with attorneys in the Office of the Principal Legal Advisor (OPLA). I conducted these interviews between July 2020 and July 2021. I primarily gained access by contacting ICE's Office of Partnership and Engagement (OPE), which facilitated two rounds of interview recruitment to a nationwide sample of OPLA attorneys at multiple levels within the organizational hierarchy. While I initially snowball sampled out of that network, I was subsequently informed by OPLA management that I was not authorized to continue snowball sampling among current ICE/OPLA employees. In addition to the OPE sample, several of my interview respondents were former ICE/OPLA attorneys who, at the time of the interview, had moved on to other jobs within the federal government or in the private sector. These strategies yielded a sample of forty interviewees, including the front-line trial attorneys who litigate cases in immigration court, supervisory middle-management attorneys, and attorneys with upper management experience at headquarters. I spoke to individuals in many of the existing ICE field offices and sub-offices around the country, both along the US borders and within the interior of the country. There are numerous potential factors distinguishing border courts from interior courts, including differences in the cases of more recently arrived and/or detained individuals, which in turn might limit respondent preparedness, their social ties with the United States, and their access to counsel, all of which strongly correlate with the lower likelihood of relief in immigration adjudications. In addition, border courts are often more geographically remote and have higher staffing turnover than interior courts. In particular, I highlight that, even given the differences described above, the power of the agency culture operates even across such distinct locations and court types. As [Table 1](#) shows, the interview sample is 60 percent female, 72.5 percent White, 35 percent identified as Democrats, 62.5 percent had worked in the agency for longer than ten years, and 60 percent previously held positions as prosecutors in other legal fields. For those attorneys who previously held other government jobs, these positions include staff attorney positions at the Department of Labor (DOL), the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA), and the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR).

Due to geographic and pandemic-related restrictions, the interviews were conducted by phone. They lasted between 1–2 hours, and most were audio recorded and transcribed. Each interview included a discussion of the attorney's pathway into working for ICE, their professional identity and experience of litigating immigration cases in immigration court, workplace conditions in the OPLA field office and immigration court, their experience of macro conditions affecting immigration case processing (that is, case volume/backlog, shifting docket and enforcement priorities, administration turnover), and their reflections on the agency mission, morale, and the politicization of ICE in the public's perception.

Given the contested nature of this agency's work, the interviewer's positionality is an important piece of understanding these narratives. I acknowledge that interviewees may have responded to my positionality (younger, female, academic, White/Latina)

**Table 1** Sample Characteristics

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERVIEWED ICE ATTORNEYS (N=40)	
<i>Demographics</i>	%
<b>Gender</b>	
Women	60
Men	40
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	
White	72.5
Asian	10
Hispanic	10
Black	2.5
Arab	5
<b>Political Affiliation</b>	
Conservative	5
Republican	7.5
Center/Independent	32.5
Democrat	35
Left/Liberal	15
No Answer	5
<b>Previous Employment</b>	
First Job	7.5
Prosecution	60
Other Government	22.5
Military	2.5
Private/Academic	7.5
<b>Time in Agency (Years)</b>	
0-4	15
5-9	22.5
10-14	47.5
15+	15
<b>Court Characteristics</b>	
<b>Location</b>	
Border	30
Interior	70

*(Continued)*



**Table 1** (Continued)

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERVIEWED ICE ATTORNEYS (N=40)	
Demographics	%
Docket Type	
Not detained	20
Detained	30
Both	47.5
No Answer	2.5

within our socially constructed interaction when framing their labor and identity narratives. Since my interactions with interviewees occurred solely over email and by phone, inferences about our shared or dissimilar characteristics would have been inferred from identifiers such as my name, voice and accent, credentials, or internet searches. As such, there is the attendant risk that these attorneys constructed their narratives of self-legitimacy to an agency outsider differently than those they constructed for colleagues. However, I had a sense of rapport and openness from nearly all interviewees during our conversations. While many interviewees were somewhat guarded, even paranoid, at the start of the interview, most warmed up quickly and frequently expressed considerable enthusiasm at being able to tell “their side of the story.” It is difficult to assess if, or the degree to which, any of my own identity characteristics shaped how interviewees viewed me, or whether they might have felt more or less comfortable with an interviewer of a different background. However, because sampling occurred through agency networks, I imagine that attorneys’ having their supervisor’s stamp of approval went a long way to ease our conversation, perhaps even more so than any shared identity characteristics. Many expressed the view that the interview allowed them to narrate their occupational tensions, which are frequently overlooked in the media, giving voice to myriad occupational frustrations or individual safety concerns. Indeed, many expressed deep concern for the political backlash the agency is facing, stating that, as a result, they no longer participate on social media, share images of their children publicly, or even reveal their occupation to neighbors and friends for fear of criticism, rejection, safety, or doxing concerns. Despite my own personal, political, and ethical objections to the practice of immigration enforcement and removal, in my role as a researcher, I aimed to listen and report on the work of these bureaucratic prosecutors as accurately and neutrally as possible.

### Data analysis

The OPLA attorney narratives I document here emerged from four separate rounds of analytical coding using Atlas.ti. During interviewing, one of the most frequently occurring themes involved attorneys justifying their role in the process of immigrant removal, often by way of explaining their work within the larger federal bureaucracy. As described above, ICE attorneys experience multiple challenges to their legitimacy—from the social and political critiques in the public sphere to shifting bureaucratic enforcement priorities that have quickly remapped the contours of their

labor. ICE attorneys raised both types of challenges when describing their labor, but the shifting bureaucratic challenges became increasingly salient in later interviews as the Biden administration unrolled significantly altered directives on enforcement in the final months of data collection (May and June 2021). Responding to these political and social challenges to their occupational legitimacy, ICE attorneys described a deep tension between the anti-ICE protest and their legally mandated role as prosecutors, while simultaneously constructing immigrants as both fraudsters and active threats to the nation. Given these patterns, I focused on how ICE attorneys experience the heightened politicization of the agency both bureaucratically and in the public perception, and how they were personally reconciling these issues. One minor limitation of these narratives is that this study does not offer additional insight into how ICE attorneys conceptualize immigrants, political ideology, or occupational identity in other areas—over time to colleagues or family at the voting booth. However, these narratives do represent how these prosecutors make sense of and justify their occupational field to an agency outsider. Most of these attorneys are career bureaucrats who worked for the federal government long before the Trump or Biden administrations. These narratives are informed by an institutional commitment to the federal agency that helps explain why agency entrenchment through the bureaucratic and enforcement approaches offers the most effective source of self-legitimacy.

### Findings

In the following sections, this article demonstrates how ICE attorneys articulate categorizations of self-legitimacy vis-à-vis their labor of federally prosecuting immigrant removal. As described above, I identify two central approaches to self-legitimation: bureaucratic and enforcement. As seen in [Figure 1](#), the bureaucratic approach leverages the dual lenses of *respectability* and *victimization*, in which attorneys legitimize their work by emphasizing their commitment to interpersonal respect and professionalism in their prosecutorial position while also positioning themselves as victims of the challenges they face as a result of political polarization. By contrast, the enforcement approach leverages narratives of *nativism* and *criminalization* to justify the labor of immigrant removal prosecution. Government attorneys who use the enforcement approach legitimize their work by framing themselves as the protectors of the nation who keep citizens safe from perceived outside threats; those who use the enforcement approach also frequently assert that the claims of immigrants seeking relief in immigration court are fraudulent or undeserving. I argue that agents find self-legitimacy through these two approaches.

Taken together, these two approaches make up what I term agency entrenchment. Agency entrenchment is a way in which ICE prosecutors can manage tensions in relation to their occupational role and ease the reputational challenges created by the labor of removal. It involves both an unthinking internalization of duty (Arendt 1964) and political entrenchment (Levinson and Sachs 2015) in anti-immigrant ideology to insulate against criticism of the current restrictionist immigration landscape. Agency entrenchment reveals how moral categorizations shape law-in-action on the frontlines of the state. Importantly, it also sheds light on the role of emotion and self-concept in the making of state policy and law enforcement and contributes to a

BUREAUCRATIC APPROACH	
RESPECTABILITY	VICTIMIZATION
Importance of distanced professionalism; respect and interpersonal fairness outweigh removal consequences.	Seeking sympathy for difficulty of government position; challenges of contestation.
ENFORCEMENT APPROACH	
NATIVISM	CRIMINALIZATION
“White knights” protecting the nation from perceived threats.	Alleging immigration fraud and criminality that diminish claims for relief.

Figure 1 Legitimizing Strategies

deeper understanding of the dynamics between politics, reputation, and occupational identity within the realm of immigration law enforcement.

**Bureaucratic approach**

*Respectability*

In the bureaucratic approach, ICE attorneys emphasize the legally mandated role they are employed to do, frequently describing deportation litigation as a “neutral” legal process in which they are simply following the law as civil servants. In this strategy, ICE attorneys deploy narratives of *respectability*—distanced professionalism and interpersonal respect—to manage the perceived reputational challenges of immigration enforcement. Despite the reality that the occupational aim of the agency is to efficiently litigate for the removal of relief-seeking immigrants from the United States, the attorneys who leverage the bureaucratic approach assert that they act with “professionalism” and “respect” towards the immigrant respondents in removal proceedings. In this approach, ICE attorneys acknowledge a perception of immigration court as unprofessional or unjust, yet attempt to counteract these ethical concerns with interpersonal politeness toward individual immigrant respondents. The bureaucratic approach is leveraged by attorneys across all offices, most frequently by women who have worked with the Department of Homeland Security for more than a decade and identify as Democrats.

To illustrate the bureaucratic approach, I highlight the narrative of Evelyn,<sup>6</sup> a long-time ICE attorney who shared her self-legitimizing strategy with me. Evelyn is a white woman in her forties who has worked as government counsel in the Office of the Principal Advisor for twelve years. Evelyn told me:

It doesn’t matter what my personal feelings are about immigration law. I’m guided by the [Immigration and Nationality Act] and by case law. We treat people with respect and kindness when appropriate, and that’s it. You go home. You sleep at night. You should never be made to feel bad about what you do.

<sup>6</sup> To protect confidentiality, I use pseudonyms for all respondents.

In this narrative, Evelyn explains how she makes sense of her work. She describes the importance of following the law, treating immigrant respondents with respect “where appropriate,” and maintaining a professional distance from her “personal feelings” about immigration law. This approach exemplifies the bureaucratic approach toward self-legitimacy, in which federal employees find legitimacy through an internalized sense of duty to the existing law. This legitimizing strategy offers Evelyn the opportunity to demonstrate her values (“respect and kindness”) while highlighting how attorneys who litigate immigrant removal are following the law as directed. In doing so, Evelyn seeks to affirm that her role is legitimate, legal, and respectful.

Jillian is another ICE attorney who has also been with the agency for over a decade, although in a different office and serving a different immigration court than Evelyn. Like Evelyn, Jillian is a white woman, identifies as a Democrat, and echoes Evelyn’s sentiments and bureaucratic approach to self-legitimacy. Jillian emphasized her commitment to interpersonal respectability, despite the perception that her labor is contested by the public. Jillian told me, “I think that it’s really important to be respectful and fair because the reality is that sometimes the law doesn’t let us do what the public would view as the right thing. Like, we can’t let everybody stay here. But that doesn’t mean we’re not striving to be fair.” In this statement, Jillian leverages the bureaucratic approach to find self-legitimacy for her role. She flags the tension between the law and the immigrants seeking legal status in the United States, highlighting that the existing law doesn’t “let everybody stay here,” and then attempts to manage the attendant conflict by treating everyone “with respect and kindness.” Jillian’s statement underscores her belief that interpersonal respect counterbalances the traumatic consequences of forcible deportation, even amid sharp public contestation of the practice of immigrant removal.

In my interviews, the respectability prong of the bureaucratic approach often emerged in response to a discussion of the ongoing challenges to the agency. Such challenges include the intensifying politicization of agency action, as well as agency instability in the wake of shifting administration priorities on immigration enforcement. Given these challenges, both Evelyn and Jillian experience a deeply felt tension in their labor with respect to its political contestation by the public. Evelyn insisted that “nobody should make you feel bad about what you do,” while Jillian emphasized that “the law doesn’t let us do what the public would view as the right thing.” In their use of the bureaucratic approach, many ICE attorneys, including Evelyn and Jillian, maintain that they have little control over enforcement policy directives and downplay their discretionary, decision-making capacities as trial attorneys. Another long-time ICE attorney, Melissa, emphasized that she is simply following the law and “do what I’m told.” This approach further underscores the distanced professionalism of the bureaucratic approach. When faced with occupational and reputational challenges, many ICE attorneys attempt to resolve those tensions by distancing themselves from the consequences of their prosecutorial labor and adopting an approach of interpersonal respectability. In the face of heightened politicization and widespread critiques of the agency, the bureaucratic approach allows ICE attorneys to gain distance from the practical implications of their labor, and uncritically continue to uphold contested agency enforcement action.

### *Victimization*

The second prong of the bureaucratic approach leverages an emotional appeal for the perceived challenges to ICE's prosecutorial labor. In this narrative of *victimization*, ICE attorneys seek sympathy for having to endure public protest of the agency's labor, as well as the shifting administrative priorities for immigration enforcement. Attorneys who leverage this strategy describe the rash of protests against ICE attorneys—public demonstrations against the agency's removal practices, online doxing of ICE attorneys and field agents, graffitied government offices, and egg attacks on attorneys' private homes. In the victimization narrative, ICE attorneys adopt a posture of defensiveness, describing themselves and their colleagues as the targets of unwarranted, unfair attacks. This narrative strategy is intertwined with the distanced professionalism of respectability but has the additional goal of eliciting sympathy for the perceived victim status of their role while maintaining their status as powerless bureaucrats in a challenged agency. ICE attorneys across all offices leverage this narrative of victimization, but it is most frequently employed by those who identify with a centrist or Democratic political position and who have worked with the Department of Homeland Security for more than a decade.

To illustrate the victimization prong of the bureaucratic approach, I highlight the narrative strategy used by Jason, a long-time ICE attorney. Jason is an Asian man in his forties and identifies as a Democrat. He has worked for the Department of Homeland Security for ten years and is currently a supervising attorney for OPLA trial attorneys in a southern immigration court. As he described his labor, he complained that his role was deeply misunderstood by the public, and emphasized the challenges he and his colleagues face in the course of immigration enforcement, saying:

We all consider ourselves faithful bureaucratic servants trying our best to execute the will of whoever happens to be sitting in the chair at the time. Just because we're doing the job, doesn't necessarily mean we sign on with the messenger . . . It sucks being enemy number one in the public perception. It sucks that I can't tell people where I work, that I have to come up with some vague answer to any questions they ask, because I'm very proud of the work we do here and I'm very proud of the people I work with. I do think that we do really exceptional legal work here. It's very frustrating . . . It's not personal for us. We're going in, we have a job to do, we want to be professionals, we are all professionals. We're professionally representing our client.

In the victimization prong of the bureaucratic approach, Jason first emphasizes his internalized sense of duty to the existing law and aims to neutralize his role and responsibility for the agency's enforcement actions in immigration. Second, Jason vents his personal frustration with the negative public perception of the agency, lamenting that this perception keeps him from sharing information about "the exceptional legal work" he and his colleagues do. Importantly, he seeks sympathy for this limitation, repeating how frustrating it is, and saying "it sucks being enemy number one in the public perception." Finally, Jason concludes by distancing himself from his work's consequences, again asserting "we are all professionals" and "it's not personal for us." In this short passage, Jason exemplifies how the bureaucratic approach offers many attorneys a narrative strategy to relieve some of the

reputational tensions they experience while engaged in this contested labor. In the victimization prong, attorneys legitimize their labor by not only emphasizing the neutrality of their individual position vis-à-vis the agency's legal policy, but also by highlighting how unfair they perceive protest to be on a personal level.

Echoing Jason's strategy, Nicole also adopted the bureaucratic approach to justify her labor. Nicole is in her forties and identifies as a mixed race. She is registered as an Independent and has worked in the agency for ten years. In her interview, Nicole draws on a narrative of victimization in order to legitimize her labor as an enforcement agent. She emphasizes how ICE attorneys feel threatened and scared by the public protest of the agency's removal work, saying:

When people talk about ICE, they only focus on deportation, that ICE is all about deportations or removal and we're evil because of it. That doesn't really take into account all the positive things that we do, and so that is challenging. As an attorney representing ICE, we're looked at as if we're evil as well. It's not really giving a full picture of our work and our portfolio and that's upsetting. Especially when individuals were being threatened because of this job title. Attorneys were being threatened. They were identified and targeted. That creates a very uncomfortable situation when you're scared to go home because you may have somebody trying [to] access your house or drawing paint on your house or threatening your life because of the job. So that's hard.

Here, Nicole deploys a narrative strategy in which she and her colleagues are victims of public protest: she asserts they are seen as "evil," and are threatened online and in person for their work. The rhetorical work Nicole does with this statement centers federal agency employees as victims of public protest while deflecting any substantive critiques of the agency by asserting "all the positive things we do." Under this prong, ICE attorneys frame themselves as the ultimate victims in the immigration enforcement apparatus. Evelyn further echoed the victimization approach, saying:

. . . it can really get you down, being vilified in the media . . . Nobody wants that. The chief counsel got this—it was essentially a flyer—sent to her. It said, 'what to do if an ICE officer puts your baby in a cage,' and then it shows the person stabbing the ICE officer in the heart. That's hard. That's hard."

This victimization strategy allows ICE attorneys to highlight the personal discomfort they experience when their work is protested, largely without engaging with or taking seriously the public protest of the immigration enforcement system or the consequences of deportation to respondents and their families.

### ***Enforcement approach***

#### ***Nativism***

In the enforcement approach, ICE attorneys emphasize a moralistic, patriotic attitude toward the labor of removal litigation, frequently describing their work as "making the country safer and protecting their neighbors and families from outside threats." In this strategy, to manage the perceived reputational challenges of immigration enforcement,

ICE attorneys deploy narratives of *nativism*, where they see themselves as heroes protecting the nation from threats. In this approach, ICE attorneys emphasize their legitimacy through a blend of unchallenged patriotism and what they see as “doing what is best for the United States.” The enforcement approach is leveraged by attorneys across all offices and demographic characteristics, but most frequently by men with a background in other types of prosecution work who identify as White and Democrat and work in courts that primarily litigate the cases of detained immigrants.

To illustrate the enforcement approach, I highlight the narrative of Daniel, a conservative fifty-year-old ICE attorney working as a supervisor in an immigration court near the US-Mexico border. Daniel has a military background, which deeply informed his enforcement approach with the agency. In his efforts to legitimize his work at the agency, he described immigration enforcement in highly protectionist terms. He described how the aim of ICE’s enforcement attorneys is to protect the nation from perceived outside, immigrant threats, saying:

The primary goal of our attorneys is protecting our community, protecting our country from the harms that could come our way, and those that are already here. Our commitment to the security of our nation is unwavering. And I’ve seen it throughout our organization . . . The amount of work that they put in to make sure that somebody who’s not a citizen of this country, who’s been convicted of a heinous crime against a child, is removed and is no longer a threat to our community. We see threats. We are motivated to make sure those threats don’t actually make it into the country and to protect folks from harm because we see those threats. We’ve continued to see that throughout the years, that there’s a lot of folks who want to come here, who don’t subscribe or believe overall what the US is all about . . . No matter how much root beer you give them, they’re not going to buy what we stand for. And they intend on doing some harm.

In this narrative, Daniel positions the values of the United States (including root beer) against a broad, undefined threat of “somebody who’s not a citizen of this country.” His legitimation narrative casts the labor of removal litigation as an “us versus them” task, for which he sees protecting the nation and “our community” as paramount to the goals of federal immigration enforcement. This nativist approach pervades the narratives of enforcement-minded ICE attorneys who frequently legitimized their work by conceptualizing immigrants as outside threats, who need to be deported in order to protect US citizens.

In another example of the nativist enforcement approach, Bethany describes how she imbues her enforcement rationale with a strong adherence to a nativist logic. Bethany is forty-four years old, a former prosecutor in the Second Circuit, who has worked with the agency for over a decade and identifies as a centrist. When making legal decisions in removal litigation, Bethany routinely asks herself if she would want a particular individual noncitizen “as her neighbor,” her personal benchmark that emphasizes the nativist-enforcement approach to self-legitimacy:

You just sort of look at it like ‘would I want this person as my neighbor?’ Basically. ‘Would I want this person as my neighbor?’ The guy who’s driving under the influence and has been arrested twice, I don’t want you as my

neighbor. I don't care if that's not an aggravated felony. I don't want you here. You're not an asset to the United States. You could kill a bus full of nuns. You know? Or the guy who was arrested twice for beating his wife in front of his children, but they got over it. . . . He took a [domestic violence] program and then the next time around, he took an anger management program. And then maybe the third time he took an alcohol program. I don't want you here. You're hurting that mom. You're damaging the psychological profiles of the children by continually abusing her, having that kind of house. [You're] not the kind of person that I want in the United States, even though you don't have any aggravated felony convictions. You know?

In this example, Bethany not only highlights her own personal and emotional investment in the case but also challenges the legal standards that dictate the outcome of removal cases. By stating "you're not the kind of person that I want in the United States, even though you don't have any aggravated felony convictions," Bethany adopts a highly aggressive enforcement approach that operates well beyond the parameters of "just following the law." However, Bethany attempts to legitimate her position by deferring to the United States, claiming that "you're not an asset to the United States." This type of moralistic enforcement approach was echoed by numerous agency attorneys, who frequently describe the personal satisfaction they derived in removing criminals from the United States, and saw themselves as heroes for protecting the nation through removal litigation. Another ICE attorney, Steven, described his enforcement approach:

I have a story about a child molester, and I really took great satisfaction in removing him, saying: 'No, you're going back to your country. You're not going to come do bad things to our children anymore. You're going to stay in your country.' That sort of thing, keeping the bad guys out, in a very simple aspect, I really take satisfaction in that. Guys who have done criminal acts, criminal behaviors, drug dealers, human rights abusers, like I said, crimes of violence again[st] children, against people, human trafficking, that sort of thing. There are just some really awful things that people do to each other; I like it when bad people get their just desserts. I like it when [I get to say]: No, no, you've done bad stuff. You don't get to play. Sorry.

Steven, a 58-year-old white Democrat, who previously worked in criminal prosecution, found self-legitimacy through what he saw as "making the country safer." Like Daniel, Bethany, and Steven, many ICE attorneys more frequently relied on nativist, anti-immigrant threat ideologies to justify their labor. This narrative of nativism conceptualizes immigrants as an outside threat, while ICE attorneys simultaneously frame themselves as protectors of the nation. This includes protecting the United States from "foreign threats" and keeping American citizens safe. In many examples, ICE attorneys attempted to establish their own self-legitimacy by othering immigrants facing removal, saying: "my job is to protect people, protect the United States, and protect the people who need protecting. My job is to keep *those people* from being my neighbor or your neighbor." By legitimizing their enforcement labor through nativism, the attorneys who leverage this approach are able to self-legitimize through a



moral, valorous, and socially desirable framework of patriotic protector work, while ignoring the consequences of deportation, the socially and politically constructed nature of crime, and the heterogenous community identity within the United States. Frequently, as seen above in the statement, “they don’t get to avail themselves of the greatness that this country has to offer,” this narrative is infused with an implicit protective patriotism and explicit nationalistic sentiment. In many ways, these individual-level strategies of legitimating their work and of infusing their daily law enforcement tasks with meaning take on the same rhetorical justifications used by the agency overall, often as protectors of the country, to remove criminal threats.

### *Criminalization*

In the second prong of the enforcement approach, ICE attorneys leverage allegations of immigration fraud and criminality against the respondents who are seeking relief from removal in court. In this narrative of *criminalization*, ICE attorneys find self-legitimacy by broadly describing the noncitizens in court as criminal and undeserving of relief, thereby justifying their removal. In the criminalization narrative of the enforcement approach, ICE attorneys adopt a posture of heroic truth-finders, describing themselves and their colleagues as shining a light on widespread fraud in the system. This narrative strategy is related to the nativist “us versus them” approach but has the additional goal of diminishing the morality and claims of those noncitizen respondents whose cases are already in court. Despite ample evidence that the majority of individuals with cases in immigration court have no criminal convictions (Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse 2022), ICE attorneys frequently point to the valor of removing “criminals” from the United States. Without acknowledging the socially and politically constructed nature of removability charges,<sup>7</sup> ICE attorneys establish legitimacy and even morality within their occupational mandates by criminalizing immigrant respondents in the cases they litigate. ICE attorneys across all offices leverage this narrative of criminalization, but it is most frequently employed by white men who identify politically as a centrist or Democrat, who have worked with the Department of Homeland Security for more than a decade.

To illustrate this prong of the enforcement approach, nearly every ICE attorney referenced the presence of fraud in immigration cases, describing it as one of the most significant challenges in this litigation work. Aaron, a white Republican in his forties, described his experience, saying: “fraud is rampant within immigration [court], and for every ten legitimate claims, you’ll get 100 people pretending to be that person. It’s a just way to stay in the country.” Chad, a white, politically independent ICE attorney in his late forties further expounded on this point, saying, “I would say that maybe two percent of the asylum claims were legitimate. . . . They were pretty much all canned in pretty much the same thing. . . . If you want to describe an asylum hearing, it’s pretty much four hours of unmitigated perjury.” In addition to these narratives from Aaron and Chad, others describe fraud in vivid detail, elaborating on what they perceive to be unlawful manipulations of existing immigration law to garner favorable outcomes. Melissa, who says she is politically “in the center,” highlights

<sup>7</sup> The list of aggravated felonies for which one is inadmissible, and automatically barred from seeking most forms of relief has grown exponentially in recent years (Chacon 2009).

what she perceives as a pattern in which respondents will fraudulently shift their claims to align with successful petitions in immigration court. In this example, Melissa finds self-legitimacy in the fact that her office is diligently “fighting” such fraudulent claims, creating a sense of meaning in the work she and the agency are undertaking, while describing her work as “tearing people’s credibility apart”:

I feel that when people talk about immigration, we talk like ‘it’s this poor person who’s being persecuted abroad and all of this.’ And that’s not as common as what people think. There are many cases where we tear apart people’s credibility and I’ve gotten many people, unfortunately, to admit on the stand, ‘yeah, I made it all up. I’m here to work. I want to make money.’ Or they take something that truly did happen to them, but then they embellish it so much that it’s this is a total hypothetical, like the person’s father did beat them when they were seven but they’re now 27 and nothing has happened since then. People think every single person coming here faces a terrible story and meets all the requirements for asylum and that’s not the truth.

In this criminalization narrative, Melissa finds self-legitimacy by identifying fraud in the immigration process—and when respondents have admitted to making up or embellishing their claims in court. This enforcement approach provides a salient way for Melissa to claim that her work is both morally appropriate and legally just.

Within the broader enforcement narrative, ICE attorneys established their legitimacy by identifying respondents as criminal and undeserving. Similar to the narratives of fraud, ICE attorneys relied on narratives of criminality to discredit respondents, arguing that the immigrant respondents seeking relief from removal are not “innocent” or deserving of relief. Such a claim allows ICE attorneys to morally justify their own labor and that of the agency. Julie, a white Democrat in her 30s who worked at the agency for five years described:

I think the misconception is the people coming in are completely innocent and just want a better life for their families, and that they’re asylum seekers. I’d say the vast majority do not qualify for asylum. . . . These aren’t asylum seekers, they’re economic migrants. When they get here, they all talk, and they know how to get around the system. Their kids, of course, they receive free schooling, they get free healthcare, they know not to put their husband’s income on the thing, so they qualify for more relief. They don’t pay taxes; they all get paid under the table. And they know how to work the system. Then when they go to commit crimes, you see this over and over in all the jurisdictions I worked, they will give them more lenient sentences than United States citizens so we cannot remove them. Instead of convicting them of a felony offense they will give them 364 days in jail [so we can remove them], they’ll drop down their conviction to some sort of disorderly conduct instead of aggravated assault with a deadly weapon so we can’t remove them. The judges really go out of their way to help them. So, we’re not totally dealing with innocent people all the time, I think that’s a big misconception of the public and they just don’t get the full facts of their criminal stuff and things of that nature.

By casting immigrant respondents as fraudulent and criminals, ICE attorneys normatively justify the labor of removal in which they are participating, legitimizing their own work, and implicitly bolstering the agency's mandate. Similarly, other attorneys described this legitimation strategy through an assertive criminalization of immigrant respondents, saying:

I don't think people see or know that we have so many cases that are serious criminals. Can't we all agree that [ ] child rapists should be removed from the United States because we do a lot of that. Same for the terrorists, can we agree that the terrorists shouldn't stay?"

### **Discussion and conclusion**

This article offers a framework for understanding how law enforcement agents legitimize their labor in response to political polarization. Using the case of federal immigration enforcement prosecution, my analysis focuses on ICE attorneys' attempts to reconcile public opinion with their agency mandate and examines the affective, cognitive, and organizational narratives they deploy to find self-legitimacy when engaged in contested labor. I have shown how, in the course of legitimizing enforcement labor, ICE attorneys leverage both bureaucratic and enforcement approaches, drawing on culturally embedded narratives of respectability, victimhood, nativism, and criminalization to establish self-legitimacy while litigating immigration enforcement. These narrative responses reflect an organizational-wide strategy of agency entrenchment in which individual ICE attorneys draw on the available scripts to manage the ethical and reputational tensions that arise in the course of their enforcement labor.

To date, studies that examine the self-legitimacy of powerholders, including immigration agents and detention officers (Vega 2018; Ellermann 2006), have focused primarily on the effect of repression and distancing strategies employed in contexts such as border control and detention center management. In this large federal agency, role internalization (Arendt 1964) and ideological entrenchment (Levinson and Sachs 2015) work to insulate individual officers against criticism of restrictionist immigration policy. By constructing individual-level narratives about their political and legal neutrality, establishing their own moral superiority as heroic and patriotic protectors of the United States, and doubling down on disputing the claims of the immigrants facing removal, this approach offers a clear avenue for relieving some of the tensions of these prosecutors' occupational self-concept. Importantly, these narratives extend our knowledge of how self-legitimacy and social psychology operate hand-in-hand in conditions of politically contested work. These findings suggest that, in addition to existing pathways to self-legitimacy (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999), entrenchment in existing bureaucratic roles provides an important avenue to insulate against public criticism and build internal and organizational self-legitimacy. These self-legitimacy narratives of ICE attorneys, then, reflect a pathway that involves relying on patriotic ideologies and anti-immigrant narratives to bolster one's own occupational value.

In practice, the bureaucratic and enforcement approaches are far from distinct, binary categories. ICE agents may draw on both of these narrative categorizations

depending on their own cultural scripts, experiences, and organizational positions as they make decisions about immigration enforcement. Despite inconsistent discretionary capabilities in their litigation strategies (Wadhia 2009), ICE attorneys, like other law enforcement agents, seek a sense of meaning, legitimacy, and justification for their labor within the agency. As such, these narratives provide a snapshot into how attorneys frame and justify the labor of removal under the conditions of political protest. However, the proposed framework is not limited to a given time period, political context, or even immigration enforcement.

Rather, the analytic tool of the bureaucratic and enforcement approaches provides a deeper understanding of the scripts that agents deploy in the course of their work. This framework should be tested across institutional and political contexts to evaluate the self-legitimacy processes and responsiveness to public protest from enforcement agents. Agency entrenchment further provides a conceptual scaffold for understanding how differences across organizational norms and practices shape how agents confront legal standards, political polarization, and their own labor within a broader enforcement context. Using the concepts and approaches embedded within agency entrenchment, further study might trace these narratives over time and under changing executive and managerial regimes to uncover the conditions under which public protest and polarization might generate institutional changes in enforcement.

Future research might investigate how narratives about self-legitimacy and stigma management operate for other politically contested work, particularly in cases where the salience of political polarization has increased dramatically in recent years, such as for front-line police officers. While the case of ICE attorneys provides an important lens into the functioning of immigration law enforcement, it is important to analyze if similar patterns of political entrenchment hold for both street-level police forces and criminal prosecutors. How do social movements such as “All Lives Matter” and “Back the Blue” reflect similar strains of political entrenchment, and to what degree do these self-legitimacy narratives vary at different educational and occupational prestige levels?

Additionally, while this paper does not explicitly focus on race, the theoretical implications of these narratives are deeply racialized. These findings demonstrate how, within the immigration enforcement apparatus, the ideological enforcement of immigration—through litigation and bureaucratic enforcement—is predominantly maintained by white, Democratic women. This contrasts and complements the existing literature demonstrating that men, and predominantly Latino men, perform the physical enforcement of immigration. Widening the lens, these legitimizing narratives are linked with the broader agency mission and project of racialized immigration enforcement in the United States. These racialized and gendered implications provide rich opportunities for future study of the agency’s legitimacy, organization, and mission as it relates to race and gender.

Finally, changes in the way ICE attorneys experience, interpret, and make sense of the labor of removal can reflect the changing policy landscape. New agency guidance introduced under the Trump administration, for example, may shape how attorneys understand their legal mandate and the task of immigration enforcement. A work environment with the explicit mandate of pursuing removal in all cases (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2017) may generate different self-legitimacy

narratives than guidance that actively promotes discretionary decision-making for litigating attorneys. Further, the nature and goals of enforcement-related activism may also shape how prosecuting attorneys decide to legitimize their labor. Given this, this article outlines a narrative framework for better understanding how law enforcement agents respond to backlash and make sense of enforcement labor across changing political and organizational contexts. In doing so, it advances our understanding of how individual actors manage the tension between reputation, mandate, and meaning and how such negotiations play out in immigration courtrooms, with very real consequences for people's lives.

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