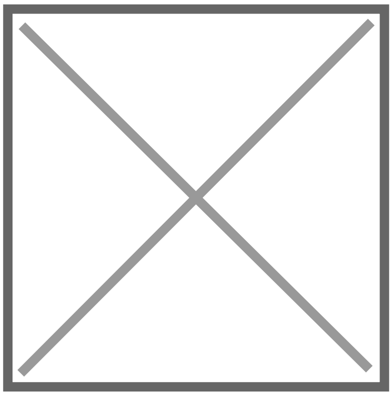

Why Protesting Isnâ??t Moving ICE â?? and What Actually Will

Description

The same question echoes again and again: Why isnâ??t protesting getting us anywhere? After a year of marches, chants, hashtags, and collective fury, ICE hasnâ??t weakenedâ??it has become more violent, more funded, and more politically shielded. Which forces the next question: what kind of pressure truly works? This is the reality of a capitalist government: public outrage raises moral questions, but money determines outcomes.

Historian Heather Cox Richardson notes that it would take only sixteen Republican senators to defund ICE and twenty-three to impeach the president. On paper, those numbers seem small. But focusing solely on Senate arithmetic overlooks a deeper truth: public outrage alone rarely moves federal powerholders. Senators do not fear protests. They fear losing power and losing money.

And to understand what could move them, we have to understand what ICE actually is.

ICE is not simply a government agency. It is a corporate ecosystem built on private prison contracts, surveillance technology, and a network of financiers and donors. Recent federal budget legislation dramatically expanded this ecosystem; the Brennan Center describes it as a newly formalized â??deportation-industrial complexâ?• fueled by tens of billions allocated to detention and enforcement (Brennan Center for Justice, 2025). Companies like CoreCivic and GEO Group, both linked to pro-Trump political donations, benefit directly from these contracts (Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington [CREW], 2025). On the tech side, Palantir received more than $30 million from ICE to build its AI-driven â??ImmigrationOSâ?• surveillance platform (American Immigration Council, 2025).

This ecosystem survives because it is fed by banks, hedge funds, pension plans, and political donors. When that economic network is stable, ICE remains politically insulated. But when investors perceive reputational risk, when tech employees protest, or when major banks pull their financing, the calculus shiftsâ??because senators detect material consequences.

And that shift has already begun. Between 2018 and 2020, sustained public pressure forced major banksâ??including JPMorgan Chase, Wells Fargo, Bank of America, SunTrust, and BNP Paribasâ??to sever ties with CoreCivic and GEO Group (Simon, 2019). Analysts estimated that these companies stood to lose as much as 70â??80% of their private financing (Equal Times, 2019). That loss isnâ??t symbolic. It undermines the financial foundation that keeps these companies operating.

Tech companies have faced similar disruption. Worker-led movements such as #NoTechForICE pressured Amazon, Microsoft, Palantir, and Thomson Reuters to defend or reconsider their ICE contracts (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2020; Helmore, 2019). Executives can ignore protesters, but they cannot ignore their own engineers, shareholders, and risk officers.

These are the kinds of disruptions that ultimately move politicians. When donors see ICE as a financial liability, when corporations fear reputational collapse, when investors divest, and when tech firms reassess contracts, senators lose the insulated environment that once allowed them to dismiss public dissent. Research on money in politics consistently shows that financial incentives, donor pressure, and electoral incentives shape legislative behavior (Hall & Fouirnaies, 2022; Center for Political Accountability, 2022). When the money moves, politics follow.

So if protests feel ineffective, itâ??s not because they donâ??t matterâ??protests matter deeply. But marching alone cannot penetrate the economic networks that actually sustain ICE.

To change the future of ICE, we do not start on the Senate floor. We start by destabilizing the structure that keeps ICE profitable. We start with the money.

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