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## IMMIGRATION IN THE 2024 US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN: policy stalemate, disinformation, and a call for mass deportation

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Immigration has been one of the most contentious and defining issues of the 2024 presidential election, rivaled only by economic policy and national security. The Republican candidate, former President Donald Trump, has largely succeeded in setting the terms of the debate – hammering away at his Democratic rival, Vice President Kamala Harris, with hyperbolic claims that she supports “open borders” and false accusations that the US is experiencing a wave of violent crime committed by migrants.

Trump’s immigration rhetoric relies increasingly on lies, misinformation, and racist stereotypes. But his claim that immigration is “out of control” – and his insistence that firm measures are needed to address it – have become central to the Republican platform, and one of Trump’s most frequently repeated campaign promises is that he will deport millions of undocumented immigrants soon after taking office.

Why is immigration such a controversial issue in the US? How have the different administrations dealt with it? Is it an overused issue in this campaign?

Immigration is an extremely complicated policy area in US politics; its arcane nuances defy understanding for non-specialists. The fact that immigration touches on core identity issues, fear of demographic change,

and economic uncertainties makes it an arena ripe for scapegoating and misinformation. A longstanding political stalemate has for decades stifled efforts to create a modernized, more flexible US immigration system, one with enough lawful immigration pathways to meet labor market demand and adequate resources to adjudicate asylum claims in a timely fashion.

Globally, economic migration and forced displacement has increased, and the smart phone revolution has democratized access to information about migration pathways. The number of migrant encounters at the US border with Mexico has grown significantly over the past 15 years. And the presence of tens of thousands of migrants in cities across the US – some 120,000 of them having been **bussed to northern US cities by Texas Governor Abbott** since the summer of 2022 – lends plausibility to the dominant framing that immigration is a problem to be solved, rather than a complex phenomenon to be managed, let alone an opportunity for maintaining economic growth and national vitality. In that context, those forced to flee their home through violence and persecution are lumped together with economic migrants by anti-immigration forces, and immigration is viewed through the sole lens of national security rather than taking into consideration the economic contributions of migrants or their human security needs.

The Biden-Harris administration itself has had a mixed record. The positives are impressive. Since President Biden took office in January 2021, the United States has rebuilt and expanded a refugee resettlement system that had been decimated by President Trump. The US has also offered humanitarian protection to hundreds of thousands of Afghans and Ukrainians, extended **Temporary Protected Status (TPS)** to certain

foreign nationals in the US from a record number of 16 countries of origin, and offered temporary entry to persons from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, regardless of their humanitarian protection needs, who can find a sponsor in the United States. But many of these newcomers have precarious legal status, leaving them vulnerable to deportation, particularly in the event of a change in the party in power. And, deeply concerning to migrant rights advocates, the Biden administration has continued or reinstated, albeit in somewhat more humane form, many of the Trump-era restrictions on access to asylum on the southern border.

In past decades bipartisan efforts at comprehensive immigration reform had recognized a threefold need: a) improve enforcement of immigration law, b) regularize the undocumented population, and c) create better

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pathways for future flows of migrants. The Grand Old Party (GOP) side of the debate has long taken an “enforcement first” policy approach: insist a need to “secure the border” before tackling other elements of immigration policy. Under Trump’s leadership, the GOP has essentially shifted to an “enforcement only” policy, one which reduces the complexities of immigration policy to the border and reduces the range of policy solutions to mass deportation and sharp restrictions on future flows. Even in the event of a Harris victory, the heated rhetoric surrounding immigration is unlikely to cool, and it will take a concerted effort – and a cooperative Congress – to move toward a more rational, balanced approach to immigration policy, one that would refocus the debate in the direction of economics, human security, and human dignity.

### **Recent history**

Today’s politicized immigration debate has its roots in global and regional developments, and the evolution of US immigration policy over the past half-century. Prior immigration restrictions were largely lifted by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which eliminated national origins quotas and allowed increased migration from Latin America, Asia, and Africa, and laid the groundwork for subsequent demographic shifts and political debates. Another key development, prompted by the end of the Vietnam War and a surge of refugees from Southeast Asia, was

passage of the Refugee Act of 1980, which aligned US law with the international definition of a refugee and established the present-day US Refugee Admissions Program.

By the 1980s and 1990s, the US saw increasing numbers of undocumented immigrants, particularly from Mexico (though irregular migrant flows from Central America overtook those from Mexico by the 2010s). The last mass regularization policy in the US came in 1986, when the **Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA)** provided amnesty to about 3 million undocumented immigrants, while introducing a stringent new employment verification process and imposing sanctions on employers who hired undocumented workers.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, led to a decisive shift in US immigration policy discourse toward national security concerns. The functions of the Immigration and Naturalization Service were absorbed into the newly created Department of Homeland Security, with

its heavy emphasis on border enforcement. **Annual admissions of resettled refugees** had peaked in the early 1980s and again in the first half of the 1990s, before settling in at annual levels between 70,000 and 85,000 in the latter half of that decade. After September 11, refugee admissions were temporarily halted then resumed slowly; total refugee admission numbers only significantly exceeded 60,000 twice in the following dozen years.

Bipartisan efforts to reform the immigration system have faltered. Comprehensive immigration reform was proposed in 2006, 2008, and 2013, each time failing due to political polarization. While there was general agreement on the need for reforms, including pathways to citizenship for undocumented immigrants and improved border security, partisan divisions over enforcement-first approaches and legalization derailed these efforts.

Immigration took on a new, more divisive tone during the 2016 presidential campaign. Donald Trump announced his candidacy on June 16, 2015, with a **speech** at Trump Tower, New York, in which he infamously stated: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best... They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” Throughout Trump’s 2016 campaign, which centrally featured his promise to build a “big, beautiful

wall” on the US-Mexico border, Trump turned again and again to this sort of racist, xenophobic rhetoric equating migrants with criminality.

Once in office, Trump enacted hundreds of measures to curtail and restrict immigration, access to asylum, and refugee resettlement. A February 2022 [report](#) by the Migration Policy Institute found that, in President Trump’s four years in office his administration “completed 472 executive actions affecting US immigration policy”. Among the more prominent were travel bans, the separation of children from parents apprehended at the southern border, and the return of most asylum seekers to Mexico. The annual refugee admissions ceiling was reduced stepwise to 15,000 admissions in Trump’s last year in office. Hundreds of other measures, large and small, chipped away at the ability of migrants to enter and remain in the United States.

Trump’s presidency was punctuated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which by March 2020 curtailed the movement of people across the world. In the early months of the pandemic, the Trump administration put in place a series of new travel bans, and invoked a public health law, Title 42, to seal off the border to nearly all asylum seekers.

### **Immigration, refugee, and asylum policy under the Biden administration**

Upon taking office in January 2021, President Biden moved quickly, taking a number of [executive actions](#) early in his presidency to reverse many of Trump’s immigration policies. The new president ended the bans on refugees from Muslim-majority countries, stopped family separations at the border (and began efforts to reunite families that had been torn apart), and called for an interagency [report](#) on the relationship between climate change and migration. Biden also proposed a pathway to citizenship for millions of undocumented immigrants, including DACA<sup>1</sup> recipients – undocumented persons brought into the US as children, who had been granted temporary legal status under President Obama (Congress has yet to pass legislation for these “Dreamers”) – and he temporarily halted deportations while reviewing immigration enforcement policies.

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1. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).

The new administration also undertook measures to increase refugee admissions to the United States. When Biden took office, the annual refugee ceiling was set at 15,000. In April 2021, he raised it to 63,500 – a largely symbolic gesture at the time, given the impact of Trump’s cuts to the refugee program and the near-impossibility of overseas refugee processing during the height of the pandemic. Total refugee admissions for the fiscal year were only 11,411: slightly lower than in the last full year of the Trump presidency, and the smallest intake of refugees in the resettlement program’s 40-year history. The refugee program eventually did recover, with over 60,000 admissions in fiscal year 2023 and 100,034 – the highest level in three decades – in the fiscal year that ended on September 30, 2024.

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Just as the refugee program was beginning to rebuild, the fall of Kabul in August 2021 resulted in a massive flow of Afghan evacuees, over 90,000 of which came to the United States. Approximately 76,000 of these were granted humanitarian parole status, allowing them to live and work in the United States for two years but not providing the same path to permanent residency as did the formal US Refugee Admissions Program. Then came the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, leading to the admissions of a large number of Ukrainians, also under humanitarian parole.

For Ukrainian parolees, the Biden administration developed an innovative private sponsorship program, [Uniting for Ukraine](#) (or U4U). This program, launched in April 2022, gives US citizens and permanent residents the opportunity to welcome Ukrainians for whom they would provide financial support for the duration of their stay in the United States. A similar program, the Process for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans (or CHNV) subsequently provided entry for citizens of those four countries who could find a sponsor group in the US. As of October 2024, more than 230,000 Ukrainians have arrived in the United States under U4U, and about 530,000 arrivals have come through the CHNV program.

The latter program was part of a suite of measures undertaken by the Biden administration in an effort to

**manage migration flows from the Western Hemisphere.** Another component has been the Safe Mobility Initiative (**Movilidad Segura**), begun in 2023, which involves the establishment of Safe Mobility Offices (SMOs) in Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Guatemala, allowing applicants to apply from within Latin America for possible lawful pathways to the United States. The SMOs were established in the context of the **Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection**, a June 2022 statement of intent endorsed by the United States, Canada, Mexico, and 19 other Latin American and Caribbean nations. Through the Declaration, partner nations pledged cooperation on root causes, lawful pathways, and humane enforcement.

At the SMOs, operated in partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), applicants are screened for protection needs and – depending on their eligibility – may be directed toward one of a number of pathways, including resettlement, humanitarian parole, family unification, and temporary work visas. For some eligible applicants, migration pathways are available to Canada, New Zealand, or Spain. According to the **US State Department**, as of September 2024 some 242,600 applicants have applied to the **Movilidad Segura** program, of which 17,600 have

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been resettled as refugees in the US, and 1,000 have been referred to other countries for resettlement.

Just as the CHNV program and SMOs provide new lawful pathways, the Biden administration has also redoubled its enforcement efforts at the southern US border, with mixed results and negative impacts on the right to access asylum. At first, President Biden reversed the **Migrant Protection Protocols** (MPP) the so-called “Remain in Mexico” policy enacted by President Trump in January 2019, under which those seeking asylum at the border were required to stay in Mexico while awaiting an immigration court date. A court ruling resulted in the reinstatement of the MMP by the Biden administration, in a slightly modified form, from December 2021 to October 2022. The Trump-era Title 42 border restrictions also remained in place well into the Biden Administration, lifted only in May 2023 when President Biden declared an end to the Covid emergency.

On May 11, 2023, the administration replaced Title 42 with new strict controls on asylum through the

Circumvention of Lawful Pathways (CLP) Rule. This required would-be asylum seekers to register for an appointment for border screening via an app called “CPB One”, disqualified most of those (non-Mexicans) who had failed to apply for asylum in another country on their way to the United States and imposed other restrictions. Advocacy groups, such as **Human Rights First** and the **National Immigration Forum** argued that the CLP rule placed restrictions and conditions on access to asylum that violate US and international law. A year later, in June 2024, asylum access was further constricted by a presidential proclamation paired with an Interim Final Rule on “Securing the Border”. These measures bar from asylum nearly all who enter the US between ports of entry and shut down the border to asylum seekers when the number of border encounters exceeds 1,500 over a seven-day period. On September 30, the rule was made final and the period over which border encounters must fall below 1,500 was lengthened to 28 days. As the **American Immigration Lawyers Association** notes, this has the practical effect of closing off access to asylum indefinitely (though the rule does allow for limited exceptions).

On the Biden administration’s own terms, the combination of the CHNV program and asylum restrictions have indeed resulted in a drastic decrease in migrants entering the US through the southern border.

At the end of September, the US Department of Homeland Security issued a **fact sheet** crediting the June proclamation and Interim Final Rule with a 55% drop in border encounters. And the Pew Research Center notes a

**sharp fall in border encounters** from December 2023 to August 2024, with the steepest decreases (drops of over 95%) among those nationalities provided with alternative pathways via CHNV.

These changing outcomes at the border have done very little to change political rhetoric. In the final weeks of the electoral campaign, Trump and his vice-presidential running mate J.D. Vance (and many Republicans down the ballot) continue to portray migration and the border as a signal Biden-Harris policy failure. And items number one and two in the 2024 **Republican Platform** are “Seal the border and stop the migrant invasion” and “Carry out the largest deportation operation in American history”.

And as **CBS News** reported, the Biden administration announced on October 4, 2024 that it would not extend the two-year parole period of those who had entered under CHNV, meaning that – once their parole period ends – they will have to apply for another form of immigration relief, leave the country, or face the possibility of deportation.

## Lies and disinformation in the Trump campaign

One of the most alarming aspects of the immigration debate in the 2024 election has been the use of lies and disinformation by the Trump campaign. Misinformation about immigrants has long been a tool of political fearmongering, but Trump has taken it to new heights, using false narratives to incite fear and rally his base.

Throughout the campaign, Donald Trump and his surrogates have relied heavily on the rhetorical tactic of associating migrants with criminality. This rhetoric relies heavily on use of sensationalist anecdotes (for example, of murders committed by noncitizens), exaggeration, and outright lies. On July 18, 2024, in Trump's [speech](#) accepting the Republican party's nomination, Trump spoke in apocalyptic terms of "a massive invasion at our southern border that has spread misery, crime, poverty, disease, and destruction to communities all across our land".

Trump and the right-wing news outlets and social media have amplified narratives of what they call "migrant crime". On a Fox News program in February 2024 (as reported by the [Washington Post](#)), Trump boasted of having invented the term himself: "I don't know if you've heard this, but I came up with this one", he told [Fox News host Laura] Ingraham. "Migrant crime. This crime – there's violent crime, there's migrant crime. We have a new category of crime. It's called migrant crime. And it's going to be worse than any other form of crime."

The basic claim behind the notion of a migrant crime wave has been repeatedly debunked. [Reuters](#) note: "A range of studies by academics and think tanks have shown that immigrants do not commit crime at a higher rate than native-born Americans." And a 2023/2024 [working paper](#) published by the National Bureau of Economic Research finds that "[a]s a group, immigrants have had lower incarceration rates than the US-born for 150 years... relative to the US-born, immigrants' incarceration rates have declined since 1960: immigrants today are 60% less likely to be incarcerated".

Nonetheless, the migrant crime trope persists and is amplified through innumerable social media posts and speeches by Republican candidates. Asylum seekers are blamed for smuggling fentanyl into the country, even though the [overwhelming majority](#) of those arrested for smuggling the drug are US citizens. In September 2024, one of the most egregious examples of racist disinformation involved baseless claims that Haitian migrants in Springfield, Ohio were killing pets

for food. Despite local authorities debunking these stories, Trump and his allies have continued to push the narrative, in the process endangering local residents and Haitian immigrants across the country.

## Implications of a "mass deportation" policy

One of the most dangerous aspects of Trump's immigration policy is his promise of mass deportation, a policy that would have devastating human and economic consequences. Millions of families would be torn apart, as many undocumented immigrants live in "mixed-status" households, where one or more family members are US citizens or legal residents. According to a [paper](#) published by the Center for Migration Studies of New York (CMS), mass deportation would break up nearly 5 million American families. This would leave millions of US-born children without their parents, a humanitarian disaster given its incalculable psychological and emotional impact on children and families.

Trump claims that mass deportation would help the economy; he even advocates for deportation as a way of relieving the country's shortage of affordable housing. But the economic costs of mass deportation

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at the scale the Trump campaign is promising would be staggering. According to a recent [report](#) by the American Immigration Council, a one-time operation to deport over 13 million undocumented people "would cost at least \$315bn" given the cost of arrests, detention, legal processing, and removals. Given the logistical impossibility of deporting that many people at once, the report also estimates that even at a more feasible pace "[d]eporting 1 million immigrants per year would incur an annual cost of \$88bn" for ten years.

Undocumented immigrants make up a significant portion of the US workforce, particularly in industries like agriculture, construction, and food services. Deporting millions of workers would create labor shortages in these industries, leading to higher prices for goods and services, particularly food. Undocumented immigrants also contribute billions of dollars in taxes each year, despite being ineligible for many public benefits. CMS estimates that undocumented workers contribute \$96.7bn in federal,

state, and local taxes annually. Their removal from the workforce would result in a significant loss of tax revenue, further straining public budgets at all levels of government.

The economic impact would extend beyond the immediate labor market. The removal of millions of consumers from the economy would lead to reduced demand for goods and services, harming businesses and leading to job losses for US citizens. The resulting economic contraction – particularly if mass deportation were to occur at the same time that high tariffs are being imposed on imported goods – could push the US into a recession, with the most vulnerable communities bearing the brunt of the impact.

Moreover, mass deportation would likely lead to violent resistance, as many migrants would refuse to leave quietly. This could result in widespread unrest, with potentially deadly consequences for both immigrants and law enforcement. Beyond the immediate economic and social costs, mass deportation would have long-

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term consequences for American society. It would deepen racial and ethnic divisions, create a permanent underclass of people living in fear of deportation, and erode trust in law enforcement. And even though the **majority of immigrants currently in the United States** (and the majority of those entering the country each year) have legal status, this matters little in the political debate, although a deportation dragnet aimed at the undocumented would affect lawfully present immigrants as well, either as part of mixed-status families or as targets of generalized anti-migrant actions.

### **In lieu of a conclusion**

And what of a Harris administration? Most analysts foresee – and the 2024 **Democratic Party Platform** posits – a policy mix fundamentally similar to the Biden administration, combining lawful migration pathways with strong enforcement mechanisms and a push for Congressional action on comprehensive immigration reform. Candidate Harris has blamed Trump for pressuring Senate Republicans to vote against a border bill that **narrowly failed to pass** in May 2024 (the bill was also opposed by several Democrats, who considered it too punitive toward migrants). But by and large the Democratic nominee has not chosen to directly engage Trump on the specifics of immigration policy. The country awaits some future political season for the return of an honest, bipartisan, fact-based discussion of immigration policy.