

The Immigration debate in the USA

1. A central theme in the presidential campaign

Immigration was a central theme in the 2024 U.S. presidential election. Former President Donald Trump advocates for mass deportations of undocumented immigrants, restricting entry for refugees and asylum seekers, reinstating the *Remain in Mexico program*, expanding the border wall, and reducing worker visas. He also proposes banning entry from Muslim-majority countries and ending DACA protections, which offers protection from deportation and a work permit, requiring renewal every two years, as a path to citizenship for individuals who were under 16 when they were brought into the U.S. illegally by their parents before June 15, 2012.

Vice President Kamala Harris supports reforms aligned with the Biden administration's policies. Her agenda includes tightening asylum restrictions and enhancing border security, and emphasizes creating legal pathways to citizenship and protecting DACA recipients.

2. American public opinion and misconceptions about immigration

According to a Gallup poll from October 2024, **21% of Americans view immigration as the most pressing non-economic concern.**

About 47% of Americans support deporting all undocumented immigrants, broken out as 84% of Republicans and 22% of Democrats. Attitudes also differ on asylum and border security policies, with Democrats favoring more lenient approaches and Republicans pushing for stricter controls. Despite these divisions, there is broad recognition across the political spectrum that the U.S. immigration system requires reform to better balance enforcement and economic opportunity.

Overstating border enforcement at the expense of immigration policy reform fosters public frustration, creating opposition not just to illegal immigration but to immigration in general.

However, the U.S. economy depends on immigrants to sustain labor force growth and innovation, which are essential to long-term prosperity. Comprehensive immigration reform is necessary to address both border concerns and broader economic needs, yet the polarization of public opinion makes such reform difficult to achieve.

Worsening polarization, several misconceptions about immigration have circulated on social media, including the claim that immigrants take jobs away from native-born Americans, but data shows otherwise. Research from the Hamilton Project revealed that native-born employment increased by 740,000 in 2023, correcting earlier survey errors that had inaccurately reported a decline of 190,000 jobs.

Another common misconception among Americans blames immigrants for rising housing prices. However, research indicates that stricter immigration enforcement, which reduces both documented and undocumented workers in construction, has contributed to the problem by slowing down residential development. Shortages of construction labor reduce the supply of new homes, driving up prices. Expanding immigration, especially in sectors like construction, could help alleviate labor shortages and improve housing affordability.

(Source : Article written by Professor of Economics Mario Macis, published on Carey Business School, Johns Hopkins University website)

3. Biden's efforts to fix Immigration

President Biden had big ambitions for remaking America's immigration system.

He said he would secure the border. He promised to make the asylum system work. He vowed to protect Dreamers. On the first day of his presidency, he proposed legislation to create a path to citizenship for millions of undocumented immigrants.

Most importantly, he said he would bridge the partisan divide that has long prevented any overhaul of an archaic immigration system that his aides often describe as a "decades-old jalopy" in

desperate need of upgrades.

But for four years, most of those goals were stymied by the need to confront a worldwide surge of displaced people fleeing their homes and a determined Republican opposition that seized on scenes of a chaotic border to block action and damage the president politically.

The president's early efforts to reverse some of his predecessor's harsh policies won praise from liberals but soon left him open to attacks by conservatives who said he had all but invited migrants to flock to the border. As the issue flared, and even Democrats complained, Mr. Biden embraced tougher measures and was sharply criticized by immigration advocates.

In the end, Mr. Biden's legacy on immigration was largely limited to his eventual success in reducing illegal border crossings to their lowest levels in more than four years. At the peak of the surge at the end of 2023, a quarter-million migrants crossed into the United States in a single month. As voters elect the next president, that number has dropped to around 50,000 — lower than parts of his predecessor's tenure.

But the immigration system Mr. Biden pledged to fix remains fundamentally broken, and some of his actions at the border moved the problem deeper into the country.

4. A mutating border

The coronavirus pandemic increased social instability and famine around the world, forcing people to flee their homes. By the spring 2021, tens of thousands of desperate children were crossing alone into the United States, seeking refuge. That fall, thousands of Haitians trying to escape gang violence crowded under bridges on the U.S. side of the border with Mexico.

To deal with the sheer numbers of people, Mr. Biden did two things. First, he embraced Trump-era measures to keep migrants from crossing illegally. He kept in place Mr. Trump's pandemic-era ban on border crossings. And when that ban was finally lifted, he imposed his own restrictions similar to those employed by the former president.

At the same time, Mr. Biden sought to relieve pressure on the border by creating new ways for about 1.3 million immigrants to enter the United States without wading across the Rio Grande or sneaking through the desert. One program allowed migrants with financial sponsors to migrate from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela. Others focused on Ukraine and Afghanistan. A new phone app allows migrants to make an appointment to cross the border at an official port of entry.

Officials argued that people from those countries were coming to the United States one way or the other. Better to let them come in an orderly process and with some limited ability to work legally in the United States while immigration authorities considered whether and how long they could stay. Both efforts by Mr. Biden helped reduce the number of illegal crossings, along with help from the Mexican government, which stepped up enforcement on its side of the border. But what the administration called a "balanced" approach resulted in the entry of many migrants now living in cities throughout the country whose legal status is uncertain.

When Mr. Biden was elected, more than three million migrants tracked by *Immigration and Customs Enforcement* had been released into cities across the United States while their cases were considered by a backed-up court system. Four years later, officials say that number has more than doubled to 7.6 million people.

5. Displacing the issue

As migrants arrived in the United States during Mr. Biden's term, many found their way north, hundreds or thousands of miles from the border communities near Mexico.

Some were bused to New York or Denver or Chicago by Republican governors in Florida and Texas, who were determined to show Democratic mayors and governors what it was like to deal with them. Others were settled by the Biden administration in small communities eager for anyone who could help solve the worker shortages that were hampering their economic growth.

Some cities where migrants were sent have struggled to pay for housing and other services,

prompting even the president's fellow Democrats to begin demanding tougher enforcement. Denver, which has absorbed more than 40,000 migrants in the past two years, recently shut down its last emergency shelter as the flow of people from the border slowed. But millions of undocumented immigrants remain in the shadows, with no way to earn citizenship. And cultural clashes between newcomers and longtime residents have become more common in places like Springfield, Ohio, where an influx of 15,000 legal Haitian migrants sparked tensions. Mr. Trump and his allies used the city as a political argument, falsely accusing the migrants of eating cats.

Extracts from a New York Times article published on November 4, 2024.

→ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/03/us/politics/biden-immigration-border-harris-trump.html>