

United States: Immigration at Center of Political Debate—and Biden Turns Right

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Immigration and the southern border have become central issues in the current political debate and could be decisive in the November 2024 election. Former president Donald Trump, who began his presidential bid in 2015 calling Mexican immigrants drug dealers, criminals and rapists, promised to build a border wall, established a “Muslim ban,” and increased immigration restrictions, now, running for the presidency again, warns, in Hitlerian fashion that immigrants are “vermin” who are “poisoning the blood of our country.”

Trump’s racist position has not changed, but President Joe Biden, at least rhetorically, favored more liberal policies, has moved to the right and is now negotiating what could become much more restrictive immigration policies.

In four years, Biden never succeeded in implementing more humane policies. Trump’s Title 42 health restrictions used to exclude immigrants remained in place for months, scheduling of interviews for immigrants seeking asylum remained difficult, with many waiting for weeks in unhealthy and unsafe conditions on the Mexican side of the border—though finally there was minimal improvement in the system, it didn’t satisfy either Republicans or Democratic Party progressives.

Republican legislators warn about an immigrant “invasion” and deplore “chaos on the southern border.” They call for closing the border, ending the asylum system, and revoking birth-right citizenship. Republican governors Greg Abbott of Texas and DeSantis of Florida sent bus and plane loads of immigrants to Democratic Party run cities like Chicago, New York, and Washington. The arrival of thousands of Venezuelan and other immigrants has created a sense of crisis in the cities. Though two-thirds of Americans still favor legal immigration, increasing numbers want some restrictions and many are concerned with the rise of immigration at the southern border and a sudden increase in the number of immigrants in some big cities.

Biden, anxious to pass funding bills for arms for Ukraine and Israel, has and seeing the shift in public opinion regarding immigration, is negotiating the issue with Republicans. They, with a majority in the House, are refusing to vote for the Ukraine and Israel arms bills until Biden gives in to their immigration reform demands.

The Republicans want in particular to change U.S. asylum policy. U.S. law and the United Nations say that anyone has the right to seek asylum who fears persecution in their home country because of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or their political opinions. Republicans would in effect abolish asylum as well as humanitarian parole and temporary protective status that offer temporary residence and work permits to tens of thousands of immigrants. Biden is now prepared to expel migrants without asylum screenings and to expand immigration detention and deportations. He would restore Trump’s Title 42 restrictions, now without the excuse of a health

crisis.

Biden is taking this new more conservative position hoping to pass his Ukraine and Israel funding bill, but progressive Democrats, human rights and immigrant rights activists, and the left are furious over these proposed changes. Pramila Jayapal, head of the Congressional Progressive Caucus stated, "Throwing immigrants under the bus—including those who helped give Democrats the White House and Senate and will be expected to again—is bad politics and bad policy. I will not vote for a package that includes harmful immigration policies." Still progressives are unlikely to desert Biden in the November election, when Trump is the other choice.

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