



Immigration was a dominant issue in the 2016 election, but not this time

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Three words echoed throughout Donald Trump's successful 2016 presidential campaign: "Build the wall."

Then, as president, Trump made immigration and border security defining issues of his administration.

Yet immigration has taken a back seat on the 2020 campaign trail. It barely came up during the presidential debate with Democrat Joe Biden or the vice presidential debate featuring Vice President Mike Pence and Sen. Kamala Harris.

Other issues have become more pressing for voters.

"The president's responses to COVID-19 and the Supreme Court vacancy have overshadowed immigration because those issues are more pressing and recent in people's minds," David Bier, an immigration policy analyst for libertarian think tank the Cato Institute, said in an email.

Polls tell the same story. According to a CNBC/Change Research national survey earlier this month, only 15% of voters said immigration was a top issue for them, compared with 40% and 39% for the economy and Covid-19, respectively. The poll surveyed 2,167 likely voters and has a margin of error of 2.1 percentage points.

Trump also has already solidified his standing as a president who's tough on immigration, from his travel ban on several Muslim-majority countries to his contentious family separation policy at the border.

"This is a very black-and-white issue for America," said James Carafano, who leads national security and foreign policy at the conservative Heritage Foundation. "It's not the kind of issue that would really move a lot of voters."

Instead, Trump's immigration platform has blended with his "law and order" agenda.

"The law and order rhetoric is combined with our immigration system," said Andrea Flores, deputy director of immigration policy for the American Civil Liberties Union. "In response to protesters who were fighting for Black Lives in Portland, you saw the Trump administration mobilize this huge immigration enforcement agency of DHS."

In turn, Biden occupies a precarious position where he has to appeal to more moderate voters concerned about public safety without alienating voters in his party who view the president's law-and-order rhetoric as fear mongering.

"The president's doing with law and order now what he did with immigration and border security in 2016," said Carafano.

Still, Trump is also seeking a way to pivot from the coronavirus pandemic, which has weighed on his poll numbers and opened him up to effective attacks from the Biden campaign.

The president seems to be facing an uphill battle: 57% percent of voters disapprove of how Trump is handling the pandemic, according to the CNBC/Change Research poll.

"The president certainly would like immigration to become more of an issue," Bier said. "He wants to claim that his closing of the borders protected Americans from the virus and economic collapse, but the public apparently doesn't see the issues as connected."

The Trump campaign said immigration remains a priority for the president on multiple fronts.

"Immigration is a critical issue in this election, and President Trump believes that immigration is not only a national security issue but an economic one, especially as America continues to reopen," said Ken Farnaso, deputy national press secretary for Trump's campaign.

The Biden campaign did not respond to requests for comment.

While immigration may not be a priority issue for many Americans this election cycle, immigration advocates say they'd like to see both campaigns consider immigration in their coronavirus recovery plans.

"Many immigrants are really on the front lines stepping up for the country," said Carlos Guevara, associate director of the Immigration Policy Project at UnidosUS. "It's very obvious to us that the way that we're going to get to a quicker recovery is to find some sort of pathway for folks to stay here lawfully, while they're in essential work or otherwise."

A recent Gallup poll found that Americans want more immigration than less for the first time since 1965.

"Both campaigns have to respect that public sympathy is incredibly high for immigrant communities right now," said Flores.