

Trump paints Democrats in corner on migrant crisis

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A White House proposal to release migrants in sanctuary cities is an overt political move by President Donald Trump to paint Democrats as doing nothing to address the surge in migrant families arriving at the border, analysts say.

The White House proposal, first reported by TheWashington Post, has been rejected by immigration officials.

Whether or not the proposal is carried out, it underscores the political tightrope Democrats face in crafting their own response to the unfolding humanitarian crisis at the border, especially heading towards the 2020 presidential election.

Democrats don't want to leave themselves vulnerable to Trump's attacks that they support "open borders."

That means that in addressing the rising numbers of families crossing the border illegally and asking for asylum, Democrats will have to adopt a mixture of humanitarian policies that also include some border-enforcement measures without making it appear they support Trump's hard-line immigration stance, analysts say.

So far, they haven't.

"I think they have been a little gun-shy in challenging President Trump," said Louis DeSipio, a political scientist at the University of California-Irvine.

But as the presidential election approaches, Democrats will quickly need a plan to address the situation at the border as illegal immigration has shifted in recent years from single men from Mexico to migrant families, mostly from poverty and violence-plagued countries in Central America, turning themselves over to Border Patrol and asking for asylum, he said.

"And if Venezuela should collapse into civil war, the flow of refugees will only increase," DeSipio said.

Democrats aren't going to win over Trump supporters who chanted "Build the Wall" during the 2016 race, DeSipio said.

But to win they will need a message that convinces independents and Democrats that they are not ignoring border security, while trying to find ways to address the current migrant family crisis in a humanitarian way, he said.

The difficulty for Democrats is that early on they chose to downplay the growing number of migrant families arriving at the border, said David Martin, professor emeritus of law at the

University of Virginia, who served as a general counsel in the former Immigration and Naturalization Service as well as at DHS.

Instead, Democrats attempted to call attention to statistics that showed overall Border Patrol apprehensions were nowhere near the peak levels seen in the early 2000s while accusing Trump of creating a "manufactured crises" to justify declaring a national emergency to build a border wall.

"The Democratic response, much of it early on, when the president was talking about declaring a national emergency, they were saying, 'Well, wait a minute; migration is at a low point. Look at these charts over the last 20 years. We are not getting nearly as many apprehensions as we used to so the flow is greatly reduced,'" Martin said.

"That response had some strength back in January. It weakens as these numbers have gone up and the pace of arrivals has really substantially increased."

Border Patrol apprehensions at 12-year high

Earlier this week, DHS officials announced that in March Border Patrol apprehensions hit 92,607. That was the highest monthly total since April 2007, when 104,465 immigrants were stopped trying to enter the country illegally.

Of those apprehended in March, more than half were adults and children arriving as families.

The Border Patrol apprehended nearly 190,000 family members through March of the current fiscal year, a 374 percent increase from the nearly 40,000 family members apprehended during the same period the previous year, U.S. Customs and Border Patrol statistics show.

Democrats face the "internal political problem" of crafting a strategy to address the surge in migrant families that will need to include some enforcement measures after railing against Trump's enforcement policies over the past two years, Martin said.

"To be effective in the 2020 election, the Democrats still have to be credible on border enforcement, but they need to find a way to define it that is different than the way the president is talking about it," Martin said.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a Democrat from California, and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Republican from Kentucky, both said this week they are ready to sit down and work on a bipartisan solution to address the surge in migrant families arriving at the border.

Grijalva: Concentrate first on short-term solutions

U.S. Rep. Raul Grijalva, D-Ariz., said he believes Democrats can come up with a strategy that combines border enforcement with measures that preserve the right for families to seek asylum in the U.S. Those solutions include hiring more immigration judges to handle asylum claims and increasing the number of Customs and Border Protection officers at ports of entry, he said.

His district, which includes a 300-mile stretch of the U.S.-Mexico border, has been directly affected by the surge in migrant families.

Border Patrol apprehensions of migrant families have soared 275 percent this year in the Yuma area. In March, U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers began releasing migrant families onto the streets of Yuma after processing centers became too overwhelmed to handle the surge.

"Democrats, we should understand that with this president, that with the inability to find common ground, we should probably concentrate not on the long-term, but the short-term solutions that I think we need to provide for humanitarian reasons, because it is a humanitarian crisis," Grijalva said.

Sanctuary cities controversy continues

Trump on Friday said the White House is "giving strong considerations" to releasing undocumented immigrants in sanctuary cities as a way of punishing Democrats.

"Due to the fact that Democrats are unwilling to change our very dangerous immigration laws, we are indeed, as reported, giving strong considerations to placing Illegal Immigrants in Sanctuary Cities only," Trump wrote on Twitter. "The Radical Left always seems to have an Open Borders, Open Arms policy – so this should make them very happy!"

Trump's comments came a day after The Washington Post published a story that his administration wanted to transport detained immigrants to sanctuary cities to retaliate against political adversaries, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, whose district includes San Francisco.

The White House backed off the proposals after immigration officials objected, The Post reported, but Trump's tweet on Friday suggests the proposal is still alive.

Critics say the the proposal would be an illegal use of immigration enforcement resources that would likely be blocked by the courts.

"This is using law-enforcement resources in ways that are unrelated to the law enforcement mission" of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, said David Bier, immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. "It's expending taxpayer money to punish partisan opposition rather than to carry out the mission of the agency and that is really what is so objectionable about it."

'His people should be focused on solutions'

Even some groups that generally support many of the tough immigration policies Trump has adopted to deter migrants from coming think the proposal to release migrants in sanctuary cities to retaliate against Democrats is a poor idea.

Doing so would place unnecessary burdens on everyone who lives in those cities, not just political leaders, said Jessica Vaughan, director of policy studies at the Center for Immigration Studies, a group that supports more immigration enforcement and overall less immigration.

"We shouldn't be releasing so many migrants into the country to begin with. We should be focused on preventing them from coming here illegally and making frivolous asylum claims," Vaughan said. "His people should be focused on solutions that will put a stop to this crisis and avoid the need to release people."

It's also unnecessary to transport migrants to sanctuary cities because many of the migrants coming to the U.S. are likely headed to those cities anyway, she said.

Trump's proposal to release migrants in sanctuary cities is aimed at scoring political points and not resolving the problem, said Larry Sabato, director of the University of Virginia's Center for Politics.

"This is a dramatic action that the president is taking to unload the problem on Democrats and to bring to the public's attention their view that Democrats aren't serious about solving the immigration problem," Sabato said.

This sort of political rhetoric, however, makes it more difficult to bring both sides to the table to work on solutions together, said Theresa Brown, a former DHS and Customs and Border Protection official who is now director of immigration and cross-border policy at the Bipartisan Policy Center.

"As an overtly political move, it's not something that the Department of Homeland Security would ordinarily engage in," Brown said. "Does it move it move any policies forward? No I don't think so. It's political back-and-forthing."