



How the Migrant Busing 'Political Stunt' Helps Both Abbott and Newly Arrived Immigrants

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September 28, 2022

Between the record number of U.S.-Mexico border encounters and the millions of backlogged cases in immigration court, there's plenty of evidence that the country's immigration system is at a breaking point. Instead of tackling big picture solutions, the public debate has narrowed in on the relatively low-impact Republican policy of busing migrants from border towns into liberal U.S. cities.

Experts are calling it a “political stunt,” the busing of migrants to left-leaning sanctuary cities. Many Democrats — including President Joe Biden — decry it as cruel and abusive. And yet the truth is a counternarrative to both Republican and Democratic accounts: Abbott's policy has actually helped newly-arrived immigrants.

TEXAS POLITICS: By busing migrants to New York, Gov. Abbott is actually helping them stay in U.S., researcher says

“The motivation may have been a political stunt, but it is paradoxically helping the border communities and also helping immigrants because immigrants are rational people. They know when to take a helping hand,” said Muzaffar Chishti, a director at the non-partisan Migration Policy Institute.

“All these 11,000 people who were sent on buses, they would have found their way into places like New York and Chicago and LA or Miami on their own. It just would have happened gradually, quietly and organically, instead of this theatrical stuff,” he said.

Chishti cited the case of Lever Alejos, a Venezuelan migrant interviewed by the New York Times, who took a free bus ride to Washington, D.C., provided by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott and is now making \$600 to \$700 per week.

U.S. Rep. Veronica Escobar, a Texas Democrat who actually represents a border district, said the free bus rides out of border cities are beneficial to migrants, even if that's not Abbott's intention.

IN-DEPTH: Abbott aimed to hit Biden hard with migrant busing. It's volunteers who are feeling the pain.

“While Greg Abbott’s directive to bus migrants arriving in Texas to major U.S. cities was intended to demonize migrants and incite fear among Americans, the policy has actually helped some migrants reunite with sponsors across the country,” Escobar told the El Paso Times.

“Arriving migrants have found that Abbott's busing strategy has brought them closer to their destinations and saved them travel costs,” she said.

Even in the most outrageous and legally questionable examples of this scheme, like Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis’ plan to trick migrants into boarding a plane to Martha’s Vineyard, the misdirection is still a relatively benign turn of events for migrants who have journeyed through some of the most violent countries in the world to get to the United States.

Migrants traveling to the U.S. often put their lives in the hands of smugglers and in some cases, face disturbing realities – like walking past the corpses of their peers or witnessing the murder or rape of others making the journey.

Immigration expert David Bier, with the libertarian Cato Institute, said his biggest issue with this policy is that it’s a waste of public funds – and ultimately a distraction.

“It’s extremely expensive for taxpayers in the states (that) are doing this. It’s inefficient because we’re spending far more than would be required to buy them (or) comp them a plane ticket or a bus ticket to wherever they’re going,” said Bier, who also referred to the scheme by Republican governors as a “political stunt” but said it was “a waste of resources, and ultimately, a distraction from the real issues that are created when you have people crossing the border illegally, and then being arrested and released without warning.”

The stunt seems to be paying off for Gov. Abbott, who is scoring political points just weeks before the November election, where the incumbent is up against Democratic Challenger Beto O’Rourke, who is trailing him in recent polls.

GOVERNOR'S RACE: Abbott lead over O’Rourke in Texas governor's race widens as voters focus on immigration over abortion

“If Abbott’s talking about the border, then the Democrats are losing,” said University of Houston political scientist Brandon Rottinghaus, who said this tactic is not at all surprising, because it’s a way Abbott can score points for being tough on immigration and pretend he’s solving a problem when really, he’s not.

“The politics of the border has always been the politics of distraction. It’s always been a way to draw attention away from other issues, certainly that’s true for Abbott,” he said.

A recent UT/Texas Politics Project poll found that 80% of Texas Republicans and 52% of overall voters supported busing migrants. In the same poll, a majority of voters said Texas officials in office weren't doing enough to prevent mass shootings and a plurality of voters said they trusted O'Rourke over Abbott on abortion.

This week, Abbott released a TV ad in English and Spanish, claiming that Beto O'Rourke is in favor of open borders, tying his policies to the smuggling of fentanyl.

While Abbott's border initiatives may be aimed at creating maximum spectacle, Bier, from the libertarian think tank, said the focus on migrant transportation does highlight the logistical challenges of processing and detaining so many migrants, only to release them on the streets.

"It is a problem that is in part caused by the federal government's approach to how it manages migration and the lack of a system to process people in a way that's orderly. It doesn't result in just leaving a bunch of people on the street, which is pretty much how Border Patrol has had to deal with large inflows over the last few years," said Bier.

A broken immigration system

This year, border encounters have surpassed 2 million — an all-time high — though many of those encounters include people who have attempted to cross the border multiple times.

Chishti, from Migration Policy Institute, said both parties share the blame for the ad hoc approach to systematic problems with the immigration system. He noted that year after year, multiple administrations have dealt with unauthorized migration across the U.S.-Mexico border.

"This is a sustained phenomena," said Chishti, "we don't have a strategy." He believes there needs to be a systematic approach to managing the border, which includes agencies that deal with large scale humanitarian crises, like FEMA.

'EGREGIOUS RECORD': Attorneys call for investigation into Houston's asylum screening process

Last year, Sen. John Cornyn introduced a bipartisan bill to create regional processing centers along high-traffic Border Patrol sectors and develop pilot programs for efficient asylum decisions, though the measure has failed to gain traction.

"What you need is a much more predictable system. And it's hard to create a predictable system within a black market, which is what illegal immigration is," Bier said. He explained that Cubans used to be a nationality that, because they had a legal avenue to enter the country, there was a much more orderly way of dealing with new arrivals at the border.

"Under the Obama administration in 2016, they would show up at a port of entry and get on a bus and go on their way and not be detained and released and all the problems that go along with that. And that was a much, much better approach," Bier said.

But Trump-era policies like metering and Remain in Mexico, pushed Cubans into crossing the border between points of entry, creating more logistical problems, because they had to be detained

by border officials. Bier said a return to the Obama administration's system would help officials deal with the large number of Cubans who are arriving at the border in 2022.

Bier said by failing to be proactive, the government is spending more on reacting to the border crisis. Instead, he suggested, leaders should focus their effort on preventing the crisis in the first place.