



Bernie Sanders' review of 2007 immigration vote leaves out important details

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For the first time in the Democratic presidential primary race, there were only two candidates on stage for a debate: former Vice President Joe Biden and Sen. Bernie Sanders.

Given their long records of service in Congress, they challenged each other's voting history on critical bills during the March 15 debate in Washington, D.C.

Biden claimed that Sanders voted against an immigration bill that, if it had passed, would have granted citizenship to 6 million people living in the country illegally. Sanders fought back, saying Biden was talking about a 2007 bill that actually had strong opposition from immigrant rights advocates and another key figure: Barack Obama.

"That bill was opposed by (the League of United Latin American Citizens), the largest Latino organization in America. The Southern Poverty Law Center called its guest-worker programs akin to slavery," Sanders said. "There wasn't really a vote on the bill. It was killed because there was a vote on the Dorgan amendment, I think it was 49-48. And you know who voted with me on that one, Joe? Barack Obama. He understood that that proposal was a bad idea. We don't need slavery in America where workers, guest-workers are forced to stay with their employers."

We wanted to know if Sanders was right about opposition to the bill and Obama's alignment on this issue. He's right about groups rejecting the bill and the temporary worker program, but his statement leaves out key details about how he and Obama voted.

Overview of the 2007 legislation

In mid 2007, Congress deliberated an overhaul of the immigration system that faced opposition from members of both parties. Some Republicans opposed a plan that they said offered amnesty

to immigrants. Some Democrats also opposed it, siding with allies in organized labor who were concerned about a provision allowing more non-U.S. citizens to come to the United States to work.

A proposed compromise measure provided a path to citizenship for workers illegally in the country, increased border security, strengthened employment law enforcement, and provided more visas for temporary workers.

On June 6, 2007, then-Sen. Byron Dorgan, D-N.D., offered what became known as the Dorgan Amendment and which Sanders referenced during the debate. The amendment sought to end a temporary worker program after five years. Dorgan argued it would open the door to more cheap labor and negatively impact American workers. The amendment passed 49-48.

Sanders voted for it, and he's right that Obama also voted for it. However, Sanders didn't mention that Biden, then also a senator, joined Obama and Sanders in voting in favor of the Dorgan Amendment. Sanders made it sound as if only himself and Obama were on the same side of the issue.

Supporters of the broader immigration bill viewed the Dorgan Amendment as a "deal-breaker." The bill died soon after, failing to secure enough votes on three separate motions to end debate, a move that would have allowed the bill to go forward. Obama and Biden voted in favor of ending the debate, while Sanders voted against ending debate each of the three times.

David Bier, an immigration policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, said Sanders' actions were somewhat perplexing: "The guest worker program he opposed was gutted, yet Sanders still voted to deny the amended bill a final vote, while Biden and Obama voted to proceed to a final vote. But if the Dorgan Amendment fixed the problem Sanders wanted fixed — as he says — he still hasn't explained why he voted to stop the bill from passing."

Opposition to the bill from immigrant rights groups

The Sanders campaign sent PolitiFact a link to a May 2007 post from the League of United Latin American Citizens, which said its national board of directors unanimously opposed the Senate compromise bill.

In its form, the temporary worker program "would create a new underclass of easily exploited workers who would be forbidden from realizing the American Dream," the group said.

In a statement to PolitiFact, the league said it did not support the bill then "because the guest worker provision created a third-class citizenship."

What about the Southern Poverty Law Center, did it say that guestworker programs were "akin to slavery," as Sanders claimed?

The center in 2007 published a report titled, "Close to slavery: Guestworker Programs in the United States." Its intent was to flag issues within an existing guestworker program as Congress considered similar proposals.

The report was highly critical of the way employees in the existing program were being treated, saying workers were bound to the employers who "import" them and lacked access to legal resources. It also said such employees were routinely cheated out of wages, forced to live in squalid conditions, and "held virtually captive by employers or labor brokers who seize their documents."

The Southern Poverty Law Center said that the guestworker program was "inherently abusive" and if allowed to continue, should be "completely overhauled."

Our ruling

Sanders said a 2007 immigration bill, "was opposed by (the League of United Latin American Citizens), the largest Latino organization in America. The Southern Poverty Law Center called its guest-worker programs akin to slavery. ... And you know who voted with me on that one, Joe? Barack Obama."

The League of United Latin American Citizens did oppose the bill. The Southern Poverty Law Center called out abuses within an existing guestworker program in a report titled "close to slavery."

As a senator, Obama did vote with Sanders in 2007 to limit a proposed temporary worker program, but so did Biden. Both Biden and Obama eventually voted on three motions to end debate and move on to a vote on the final immigration bill. Sanders did not vote to end the debate.

Sanders' statement is partially accurate but leaves out important details or takes things out of context. We rate it Half True.