

QUARTZ

Democratic candidates are failing to confront the key issue on immigration

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That question, which came up again during tonight's face-off, goes to the heart of most candidates' strategies for defending immigrants from US president Donald Trump's anti-immigrant policies. It doesn't, however, address the country's most pressing immigration problem: the crisis at the US-Mexico border.

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That creates two problems. People who are eligible for protection have to wait a long time to receive it. And people who don't qualify get to stay for months, or even years.

Instead of bolstering the asylum system so it could more quickly weed out undeserving cases, Trump has doubled down on the kind of policies previous administrations used to intercept and deport border crossers, like sending troops to the border.

It's unclear how some of the Democratic proposals would fix the asylum problem. Eliminating the law that makes entering the country illegally a crime, Section 1325, wouldn't ease the backlogs in immigration court, and it wouldn't stop family separation. Some candidates claim, correctly, that the Trump administration used the law to separate immigrants from their children. But Trump rolled back that policy last year after public outcry. A federal judge later ordered the government to stop the practice unless parents posed a danger to their children. The Department of Homeland Security is now using that exception to continue family separation, something abolishing Section 1325 wouldn't prevent.

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To solve it, the US needs to tie its border policy to its work visa policy. More legal workers would mean fewer undocumented immigrants. That would help prevent the deaths and mistreatment Democratic candidates are railing against, and save taxpayer dollars now pouring into immigrant detention, Bier said.

Most Democrats are not making this connection between the border crisis and work visas, but some are calling for expanding legal paths for immigrants to come to the US. Warren is calling for "targeted immigration" to fill positions American workers don't want. Castro, meanwhile, wants to do away with per-country limits for all visas. Former US representative John Delaney, from Maryland, simply says he wants to "reform the visa program for guest workers."

Washington governor Jay Inslee, meanwhile, has a slew of proposals on how to improve the visa program, ranging from tying visa caps to labor markets to creating a task force of farmers and farm workers to come up with a better way to manage guest worker visas.

O'Rourke, too, has a plan for work visas, which includes allowing entrepreneurs and patent holders to stay, among other measures.

None of them, however, get too deep into the details.

Aid to Central America

Another strategy to stop the chaos at the border is to address the causes that are driving people to flee their countries. The US could help Central America tackle the corruption, impunity, and inequality that makes it so hard for immigrants to stay.

The Trump administration has done the opposite, reducing aid to Central America. Most Democratic candidates want to restore it. Former vice president Joe Biden, whose immigration platform doesn't have any concrete details about the asylum system, underscores the need to attack the problem at its origin.

“As vice president, I led a major, bipartisan effort to address the root causes that push people to flee, relieving pressure on our border by improving security, reducing inequality and expanding economic opportunity in Central America so that people feel safe to stay in their home countries,” he wrote in a Miami Herald op-ed outlining his ideas on immigration. “We were making progress until President Trump replaced sound strategy with hostility and inflammatory rhetoric.”

Castro goes as far as proposing a “21st century Marshall plan for Central America.”

What about enforcement?

The common thread in most of the candidates’ platforms so far is their lack of emphasis on enforcement. Some are actually calling to scale it back. Vermont senator Bernie Sanders, whose immigration platform is spelled out in a few bullet points on his website, wants to “dismantle cruel and inhumane deportation programs and detention centers.”

However, he doesn’t say what should replace them.

“It’s as if the only problem here is not providing protections to the people who are seeking asylum, not recognizing that at the end of the day, not everyone is going to be eligible for asylum and therefore we have to have a mechanism to remove people,” said MPI’s Chishti.

That might not make for a good soundbite in an era in which the government is housing immigrants under overpasses and denying toothbrushes and soap to children. But until Democrats address the roots of the asylum system problem, their ideas won’t make for very good immigration strategies either.