



In two Texas border towns, Biden and Trump push for different immigration approaches

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President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump visited two different Texas border cities on Thursday in dueling trips that put immigration squarely at the center of their near-certain rematch in this year's presidential election.

The visits came on the heels of a bipartisan immigration bill failing in the U.S. Senate after Trump told Republicans not to vote for it, in part so that he could campaign on the issue. The bill proposed overhauling the nation's asylum system to provide quicker answers to migrants and allow presidents to order immediate deportation of migrants at the border when immigration agents get overwhelmed.

Biden didn't announce any new immigration policy in Brownsville on Thursday, but made a push for Congress to approve the bipartisan immigration bill. He was accompanied by U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas; U.S. Rep. Vicente Gonzalez, D-McAllen; and Brownsville Mayor John Cowen.

"The majority of Democrats and Republicans in both houses support this legislation," Biden said during a speech at a U.S. Customs and Border Protection station. "Until someone came along and said don't do that that'll benefit the incumbent. That's a hell of a way to do business in America for such a serious problem."

President Joe Biden gives remarks during a visit to Brownsville on Thursday, Feb. 29, 2024.

Meanwhile in Eagle Pass, Trump, who was joined by Gov. Greg Abbott at Shelby Park, repeatedly criticized Biden's handling of immigration, saying the "United States is being overrun by the Biden migrant crime."

Trump specifically mentioned Laken Riley, a 22-year-old Augusta University nursing student whose body was found in Georgia last week. Riley's death was thrust into the national spotlight when police disclosed that the man charged with the killing was a Venezuelan immigrant, and Trump suggested the Biden administration was culpable.

The Marshall Project recently reported that there has not been an increase in reported crime in cities where migrants have moved to.

Trump also praised Abbott's deployment of concertina wire along the Rio Grande and efforts to arrest migrants who cross the border illegally.

"He really stepped it up," Trump said. "It's been amazing."

The two candidates' visits came the same day a federal judge blocked a new state law that sought to allow Texas police to arrest people suspected of crossing the border illegally and judges to order them to return to Mexico.

In the recent past, Brownsville has experienced high numbers of migrants crossing into the country. Large migrant encampments have been a frequent sight on the other side of the border in Matamoros, Mexico. Eagle Pass has recently served as the epicenter of immigration enforcement efforts by Texas officials, who have been locked in a tense standoff with the federal government. In December, that town also experienced thousands of migrants crossing the Rio Grande.

Abbott on Thursday accused Biden of only traveling to the Texas-Mexico border after it was announced that Trump would be appearing in Eagle Pass.

Biden, meanwhile, also called out Trump — and asked him to push Congress to pass significant immigration legislation.

"Here's what I would say to Mr. Trump instead of playing politics with this issue, instead of telling members of Congress to block this legislation, join me, or I'll join you, in telling the Congress to pass this bipartisan border security bill. We can do it together."

Trump has said that immigration enforcement will be among his priorities if he wins back the presidency in November. During his presidency, his administration rolled out a series of policies aimed to prevent people from seeking asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border and deter migrants from crossing the border illegally.

His policies included the emergency health order known as Title 42, which immigration officials used to immediately turn away people at the border without allowing them to request asylum; the "remain in Mexico" program that forced some migrants with pending asylum cases to wait in Mexico before their cases were adjudicated; and a "zero tolerance policy" to criminally charge adults who illegally crossed the border, which required Border Patrol agents to separate children from their parents.

The federal government also built 55 miles of new barriers along the U.S.-Mexico border after Trump promised in campaign rallies to build a "big, beautiful wall."

The Biden administration slowly reversed some of Trump's policies, such as the use of Title 42, and scrapped the "remain in Mexico" program. It also created and expanded programs that help some immigrants to enter the country legally. For example, last year it announced a program that allows 30,000 people from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela to legally migrate to the U.S. each month, as long as they have a financial sponsor in the U.S. It also expanded a 2014 program that allows children in Central America to legally reunite with family members already in the U.S.

Trump and other Republican leaders have characterized Biden's actions on immigration as open-border policies — that's a frequent refrain by Gov. Greg Abbott, who picked up where Trump left off and has flooded the border with state troopers, National Guard and spent state money to build barriers and deploy concertina wire.

The Biden administration has angered some of its supporters by implementing policies that also make it more challenging for migrants to enter the U.S. legally.

In early 2023, the Biden administration began requiring asylum-seekers to use the CBP One cellphone application to seek one of 1,400 daily appointments to request asylum at a port of entry. The administration also implemented a rule last year that disqualifies migrants from receiving asylum if they entered the country illegally (Under U.S. law, migrants have a right to apply for asylum regardless of how they enter the country.)

“In fact, virtually every measure of border enforcement currently is, or has at various points been, at a level that is higher than when Biden came into office — often higher than at any point under the Trump administration,” David J. Bier, associate director of immigration studies at the Cato Institute, a Washington-based libertarian think tank, wrote in a recent report.