



After fumbling border security, the immigration crisis is on Republicans

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President Biden must feel like he can't catch a break. Even as the nation's cost-of-living crisis seems to be abating, another is rising to take its place: A record-breaking surge of illegal immigrants across America's southern border.

Recent polls show that immigration has either edged out inflation as U.S. voters' top concern or is running a close second. The last thing President Biden and Democrats need is a chaotic border taking center stage in the 2024 presidential campaign.

But migrants are thronging to the border because they've heard it's gotten easier over the past three years to get into the country. In fiscal year 2023, U.S. border authorities encountered a record 2.5 million immigrants; in December, border crossers tallied the highest monthly total ever — nearly 250,000.

The spike has overwhelmed border and customs officials, flooded immigration courts and detention shelters and imposed heavy economic costs on border communities. It's also sparking a backlash in big "sanctuary cities" like Chicago, Denver and New York, where Texas Gov. Greg Abbott has been busing migrants.

The public consequently gives Biden low marks for handling immigration. That's especially true in key swing states, where by hefty margins voters trust Donald Trump more than Biden to manage the situation on the border.

But if immigration is a political headache for Biden and his party, it's turning into a debacle for the Republican Party. Yesterday, in a stunning display of hypocrisy and cowardice, Republican congressional leaders torpedoed a tough national and border security bill designed to drastically curtail illegal immigration.

Speaker Mike Johnson (R-La.) pronounced it "dead on arrival," even though he and House Republicans had previously demanded that the Senate send them just such a bill as the price of their support for military aid for Ukraine.

With the blessing of both party's leaders, Sens. James Lankford (R-Okla.), Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) and Kyrsten Sinema (I-Ariz.) crafted the crosspartisan bill following four months of difficult negotiations with the White House.

The package includes \$20 billion in emergency spending to hire more border and asylum officials and expand detention facilities, \$17 billion and \$10 billion for security and humanitarian aid to Israel and Gaza and \$62 billion Ukraine urgently needs to defend itself from Russian aggression.

It also includes provisions sharply restricting asylum and parole claims, shutting down the border automatically if daily crossings reach unmanageable levels and speeding court hearings for immigrants seeking admittance as refugees.

These are major concessions on Biden's part, but Republicans won't take "yes" for an answer. Instead, they've caved to Trump's demands that they kill the bill so he won't be deprived of a potent campaign issue.

For all their hysterical bleating about an "invasion" of criminals and terrorists, many Republicans on Capitol Hill evidently believe the graver danger is working with Democrats to stop it. Instead of doing their job, House Republicans yesterday indulged Freedom Caucus extremists in yet another pathologically partisan sideshow: A vote to impeach Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Majorkas for doing his job.

Also fouling the legislative waters are conspiracy theories.

"The Democratic Party changed its immigration policy when its leaders began to hope that they could import voters to compensate for the loss of voters that Democratic policies were alienating," avers political commentator Michael Lind, who styles himself as a populist.

There's irony here: Before Trump came along, Republicans were a reliable voice for a more permissive approach to illegal immigration.

Partly that reflected business demand for a steady stream of cheap labor to do jobs Americans supposedly won't do. GOP and business leaders also have thwarted attempts to require employers to adopt the E-Verify system, a simple and effective way to ensure they aren't hiring illegal workers.

Libertarian outfits like the Cato Institute have churned out reports and analyses asserting that, over the long haul, immigration is a net-positive contributor to U.S. economic growth whatever its short-term costs to workers and communities.

But as the economist George Borjas has observed, this narrow view of migrants as labor inputs is blind to the societal costs of mass immigration as well as the challenge of assimilating a high volume of newcomers.

Over on the left, House progressives are pummeling Biden for backing the Senate bill, which some call "Trump lite" They warn that it could further alienate young activists upset by Biden's staunch defense of Israel's right to defend itself against Hamas.

Progressives' nonchalance about enforcing U.S. immigration laws, however, is not shared by most Americans — including young voters. It's also out of step with previous Democratic presidents, Barack Obama and Bill Clinton, who drew a sharp distinction between illegal and legal migrants.

This change reflects the party's new demographic profile and class structure. Since 2000, the influence of college-educated millennial activists and professionals has risen as white working-class, non-college voters have decamped to the Republicans.

Steeped in identity politics, progressive activists are quick to brand any attempt to stem illicit border crossings as nativist if not racist. During the 2020 primaries, many Democratic candidates tried to win them by striking “bold” poses for decriminalizing the border and abolishing Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Biden refused to endorse these fatuous demands for an open border. But his attempts to regulate the border flow through executive action have fallen short.

Both parties are complicit in what's happening on the border, and neither party can fix it alone. By cravenly submitting to Trump and rejecting legislative compromise, House Republicans have again chosen performative outrage over delivering real solutions.

So now they own the border crisis too.

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