



Texas leaders join fray as woman's killing reignites illegal immigration clash

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WASHINGTON — The death of a 20-year-old college student allegedly at the hands of an immigrant in Iowa has upended the immigration debate and galvanized Republicans ahead of the midterm elections, enveloping Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick in a war of words with Fox News personality Geraldo Rivera.

A new Cato Institute report based on Texas crime statistics shows that people in the country illegally commit serious crimes at lower rates than native-born Americans.

The rate for legal immigrants is even lower.

Nevertheless, the arrest of a man suspected of being in the country illegally in the death of Iowan Mollie Tibbetts has fueled the hardline position that illegal immigration is a significant source of crime, turning it into a potent GOP campaign theme in November.

In a Fox interview Thursday, Trump called Tibbetts “this beautiful young girl ... killed by a horrible person that came in from Mexico, illegally here,” suggesting the need for his proposed border wall and tougher immigration laws.

Trump also has strongly backed the Houston-based Remembrance Project, which opened a Washington office in the early days of his administration to champion the victims of crimes committed by immigrants living in the country illegally.

“It’s another example of an American being killed by someone who should not be here in the first place, and that’s directly due to our current laws not being enforced, our borders not being secured, and elected officials not protecting America and its citizens,” said Remembrance Project co-founder Maria Espinoza.

Geraldo bucks conservative Fox News

Soon after Tibbetts' body was found Tuesday in a cornfield, a month after she disappeared while jogging, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott tweeted, "This is why so many Americans are angry about sanctuary cities. It's why Texas banned sanctuary cities. It's about safety."

Patrick first jumped into the fray Thursday, going on to challenge Rivera, who had said earlier on Fox News that Tibbetts' death is a "murder story ... not an immigration story."

Rivera, taking on his own conservative cable network, also tweeted that the tragedy was being used "to promote (the) proven false notion that undocumented immigrants are disproportionately committing violent crimes. [#PewFoundation](#) & other objective researchers say those immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than citizens."

Patrick, who has so far refused to debate his Democratic opponent, Mike Collier, ended his own Fox interview by pressing for a nationally televised debate with Rivera.

"The CNNs, the MSNBCs, most of the print media in this country and the Democrats — they are all accomplices in the death of this young girl and the death of everyone else," Patrick said. "And even Geraldo Rivera ... I saw him on Fox saying, 'I feel badly about this, but —' There is no 'but,' and I'll be happy to debate Geraldo Rivera any time, any place, anywhere on this issue. We have to secure this border and protect the lives of American citizens."

Rivera fired back in a series of tweets.

"[@DanPatrick](#) claims outrageously that I'm effectively an accomplice to horrifying murder of [#mollytibbetts](#) because I beg compassion & mercy for undocumented immigrants — How dare he make so false an allegation? He is fear-mongering & I accept his challenge for debate."

Rivera added: "Vast majority of the 11-12 million undocumented here are hardworking, otherwise law-abiding-For decades they've come & gone home over Southern border. Since 9/11, these workers have been treated as terrorists by politicians like [@DanPatrick](#). Ratify [#DACA](#) bring reason to immigration."

Victim's family cringes as debate intensifies

Amid reports about the immigration status of the suspect, 24-year-old Mexican national and farmworker Cristhian Bahena Rivera, some of Tibbetts' friends and family members also have called for the case not to be politicized.

Tibbetts' aunt, Billie Jo Calderwood, posted a message on Facebook on Tuesday saying, "Please remember, Evil comes in EVERY color."