

Biden is trying to fix Trump's broken immigration system

Maria Cardona

February 29, 2024

Both President Biden and former President Trump are visiting the U.S.-Mexico border today, where voters will hear dueling messages about what each believes the other one has done or failed to do. As such, it is important to debunk the gargantuan myth of how successful Trump was on the issue of border security and controlling illegal immigration.

Trump was not successful. In fact, he made the issue much worse, decimating the legal immigration system while failing to deter illegal migration.

But Democrats need to do a much better job highlighting these failures and must be more proactive about the balanced solutions they support — and Americans prefer — while resisting the urge to lean into enforcement-only MAGA-inspired actions that betray American values and have failed in the past.

According to the Cato Institute, data published late last year shows that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) under Biden “has removed a higher percentage of arrested border crossers in its first two years than the Trump DHS did over its last two years.” Additionally, the data shows migrants were more likely to be released after being arrested at the border under Trump.

DHS under Biden is deporting 3.5 times as many people per month as DHS did under Trump. These facts are critical as Americans judge who is trying to do the job of protecting the border and who is covering up complete failures and trying to pass them off as mythical success stories. This data lays out how each administration has fulfilled (or failed to fulfill) its responsibility of border enforcement.

Let's now look at how the Trump administration fared in shoring up our legal immigration system, a critical part of ensuring a well-managed flow of needed workers, and of keeping our commitment to protect those legally seeking asylum and refugee status as they flee persecution. It is also a key part of Republican talking points — if they are to be taken seriously — as they so glowingly tout how much they support “legal immigration.”

By the end of 2020, the Trump administration had reduced by more than 80 percent the number of green cards issued and drastically cut refugee arrivals by 92 percent. Some of that can be attributed to the pandemic, but the numbers of green cards and refugees started to decrease the

moment Trump came into office. Additionally, he reduced the whole of the legal immigration system by half by July 2020, and he didn't stop there.

So when Biden came into office, the immigration and asylum system was in complete tatters and in desperate need of rebuilding. According to David Bier, associate director of Immigration Studies for the Cato Institute: “Starting in January 2017, our already failing immigration system faced an assault unlike any in American history ... For the first time since the Refugee Act of 1980, an administration unilaterally nullified asylum law to send people back to persecution and torture.” Bier argues that the Biden administration pulled this system back from the brink, increased legal pathways, protected refugees and expanded work permits for migrants to work lawfully.

These facts are rarely heard in discussions about this contentious issue. But they are critical for Americans to understand to decide who really has the knowledge, experience and best intentions to lead and reform a broken system — and who wants to further weaponize the issue for personal political gain.

A few weeks ago, Republicans, directed by Trump, sank their own border security bill that contained a wish list of GOP security-only proposals, which Democrats helped negotiate as a first step to gain control of the migrant flows at the southern border. But as soon as Trump saw that the bill would pass with majority Democratic support, he knew he would not be able to weaponize the issue with a solution on the horizon. This sorry episode proves that Trump and the MAGA-controlled House leadership are not interested in solutions — only the ability to use the border and immigration as political fodder.

Americans know better. But they need to hear their more commonsense leaders spell out the solutions they support. Rep. Tom Suozzi (D-N.Y.) did just that in his recent special election, and it is a big reason he won. Suozzi leaned into a balanced approach that included strong border security measures and expanded pathways for more immigrants to legalize. He understood, as most Americans do, that immigration is a net positive to our country. Recent reports indicate that the surge in immigration is a \$7 trillion gift to our economy over the next decade.

The Biden administration has not been perfect on immigration — far from it. But they rebuilt a decimated system handed to them by Trump that destroyed most legal pathways and increased illegal flows.

So when we hear the presidential candidates talk about the border, remember these facts. Americans should expect a Trump screed about migrant invasions, building walls, mass deportations and family separation. Voters still reject these draconian approaches. But only when they are contrasted with what voters do support — balanced, fair, humane solutions that include tough security measures, but also increases in legal pathways for “Dreamers,” essential workers and long-settled immigrants who have started families and have thriving businesses.

President Biden has a golden opportunity to highlight these approaches, flip the script on this divisive issue, and bring Americans together based on the country's founding values — and on what works.

