



Trump Is Flat Wrong About Ike and Immigration

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In last night's Republican Presidential debate, Donald Trump argued that President Eisenhower immigration enforcement plan called Operation Wetback (Trump didn't use that horrendous name) drastically reduced unlawful immigration in the early 1950s. He said:

“Let me just tell you that Dwight Eisenhower. Good president. Great president. People liked him. I liked him. I Like Ike, right? The expression, ‘I like Ike.’ Moved 1.5 million illegal immigrants out of this country. Moved them just beyond the border, they came back. Moved them again beyond the border, they came back. Didn't like it. Moved ‘em waaaay south, they never came back. Dwight Eisenhower. You don't get nicer, you don't get friendlier. They moved 1.5 million people out. We have no choice. We. Have. No. Choice.”

The evidence and statements by border patrol and INS officials in the 1950s and afterward disagree with Mr. Trump's analysis. Increased immigration enforcement did not reduced unauthorized immigration in the 1950s, legal migration did.

Background

In 1942, the United States government created Bracero guest worker visa program to allow Mexican farm workers to temporarily work for American farmers during World War II.[i] The government entered into a bilateral labor agreement with Mexico that regulated the migrant's wages, duration of employment, age of workers, health care, and transportation from Mexico to U.S. farms.[ii] Transportation to the farm, housing, and meals were sold by the employers for a low price.[iii] Ten percent of the migrant's wages were deducted from their paychecks and deposited in an account that would be turned over to them once they returned to Mexico.[iv]

The Bracero program did not limit the number of migratory workers as long as the government's conditions were met, making the system flexible to surges in demand. As a result, nearly five million Mexican workers used the Bracero program from its beginnings in 1942, when the first group of 500 braceros arrived at a farm in California, until the program's cancellation in 1964.[v]

The program’s flexibility increased over time as the Border Patrol and INS realized that the Bracero program was an indispensable component of reducing unlawful immigration by providing a lawful means of migration. During the early phase of the program, the United States government acted as the arbiter and distributor of the Mexican workers to American farms – heavily subsidizing the movement and not requiring total reimbursement for government expenses on medical and security screenings.[vi] Later, as the number of unauthorized immigrants began to rise, the government reformed the program to allow for workers and employers to deal more directly with fewer regulations and government subsidies.[vii]

Unauthorized Immigration in the 1950s

During the early, more regulated, and thus restricted phase of the Bracero program, unauthorized immigrants continued to cross the border which resulted in almost two million of them living in the United States by the early 1950s.[viii] The immigration enforcement apparatus performed well when few unauthorized immigrants were trying to enter the United States during the Great Depression and World War II, but it suddenly broke down in the face of sustained postwar unlawful migration.

In 1946, the year after the war ended, an INS report recorded a massive increase in unauthorized entries that was “riddling the country of aliens illegally in the United States” with more illegal entries than any previous year.[ix] Reports in subsequent years reported the same steady increase in the number of illegal immigrants and enforcement actions (table 1).[x] In 1950-51, the volume of unauthorized Mexican immigrants was so high that the INS institutionalized a voluntary departure procedure that was quicker and cheaper.[xi] Government reports described the large increase in unauthorized immigration after World War II as “virtually an invasion.”[xii]

Table 1

Aliens Deported and Voluntary Departures, 1946-1952

Year	Aliens Deported	Voluntary Departures
1946	14,375	101,945
1947	18,663	195,880
1948	820,371	197,184
1949	20,040	276,297
1950	6,628	572,477
1951	13,544	673,169
1952	20,181	703,778

Source: Congressional Research Service, 1980.

Government Responses – Expanding Visas & Enforcement

The government responded to the increased illegal immigration with two interrelated and coordinated actions. The first and more important action (to say nothing of its humanity), was a legal reform and expansion of the Bracero guest worker visa program in 1951.[xiii] The second was called Operation Wetback, a nasty immigration enforcement operation begun in 1954 (it expanded on earlier program) that altogether removed almost two million unauthorized Mexicans in 1953-1954.[xiv]

What Mr. Trump and other supporters of harsh enforcement actions like Operation Wetback won't tell you is that increased enforcement was combined with an increase in legal migration opportunities. Many of the migrants rounded up in the enforcement buildup to Operation Wetback were legalized on the spot, a long-standing process derogatively referred to as "drying out" illegal migrant workers,[xv] and given a bracero work visa.[xvi] "Drying out" was not invented during Operation Wetback; it had been common practice beginning in 1947 and was made law in 1951.[xvii] Although data is sparse on the number of unlawful migrants who underwent "drying out," in 1950, 96,239 migrant workers were legalized in that process and the Department of Labor actually gave preference to legalizing unlawful migrants over admitting new braceros.[xviii]

Other unlawful migrants were driven down the border and made to take one step across the border and come back in as a legal bracero worker, a process referred to as "a walk-around statute." [xix] The combination of a legal migration pathway with consequences for breaking immigration laws incentivized Mexican migrants to come legally. As a result, the number of removals in 1955 was barely three percent of the previous year's numbers. Those who previously would have entered unlawfully instead signed up to become braceros, which was the intended purpose of the reforms.[xx]

The government did not tolerate unlawful entry but the INS made it very easy for migrants to get a guest worker visa and used the Border Patrol to funnel unauthorized migrants and potential unauthorized migrants into the legal system – sometimes simplifying the system beyond what Congress intended.[xxi] Increased lawful migration, flexibility, and enforcement funneled migrant workers into the bracero Program and reduced unauthorized immigration by an estimated 90 percent.[xxii] The existence of a legal visa for lower skilled Mexican migrants was essential to the decrease in unlawful immigration.

Bracero Deserved Credit for Halting Unauthorized Immigration, According to Border Patrol and INS

The Bracero program was effective at stopping unlawful immigration for two reasons. First, it created a large and easy to use visa for farmers in the United States. If the cost of employing bracero workers was too high, farmers would just hire unauthorized immigrants as they threatened to do numerous times – and Border Patrol and INS listened.[xxiii] Prior to the expansion and partial deregulation of the Bracero program in 1951, employers in the Rio Grande Valley referred to the Border Patrol as a “Gestapo outfit” that wrenched their willing unlawful workers away from employment.[xxiv] Along with increased enforcement, INS Commissioner Joseph Swing realized that he would have to enlist the cooperation of the employers of unlawful migrant workers if the INS was to have any hope of shrinking the number of unauthorized workers.[xxv] He knew he would have to affect both the supply and demand for unauthorized workers.

Before launching Operation Wetback, Swing travelled and spoke to numerous audiences and farmers assuring them that their unauthorized workers would be replaced with legal workers from Mexico on a bracero work visa.[xxvi] In Swing’s words, the purpose of a ten-day trip to visit farmers along the border prior to the launch of Operation Wetback, was to tell them: “If there is any employer who cannot get legal labor all he has to do is let either the Department of Labor or Immigration know and we will see that he gets it ... I am quite emphatic about this because I know I am going to run into some opposition in Southern Texas.”[xxvii]

Swing characterized the success as an “exchange” of illegal workers for legal guest workers.[xxviii] For example, the 1953 harvest in the Rio Grande Valley only employed 700 legal guest workers while in 1954 the number had grown to 50,326.[xxix] At every opportunity, Swing praised farmers and gave them credit for the substitution of illegal workers for legal bracero workers, saying the “accomplishment of this task would have been impossible without the generous cooperation extended to the effort by ranchers, farmers, and growers.”[xxx]

Beginning in 1954, Commissioner Swing also issued I-100 cards to law-abiding bracero workers who were favored by particular American growers, further simplifying the bureaucratic process for them to re-enter and work in the future.[xxxii] The INS eventually came to believe that the I-100 cards were an integral part of their efforts to keep unlawful immigration low.[xxxii] The INS also made it easy for braceros to move among farms to work regardless of the original labor contract.[xxxiii] As historian Ernesto Galarza wrote, “[t]he most skeptical of farm employers could see that the private black market was no longer vital, now that a public one could be created at will.”[xxxiv] The Bracero program made it economically advantageous for American employers of unlawful immigrants to cooperate with the Border Patrol and INS to ensure that their workforces were legal.

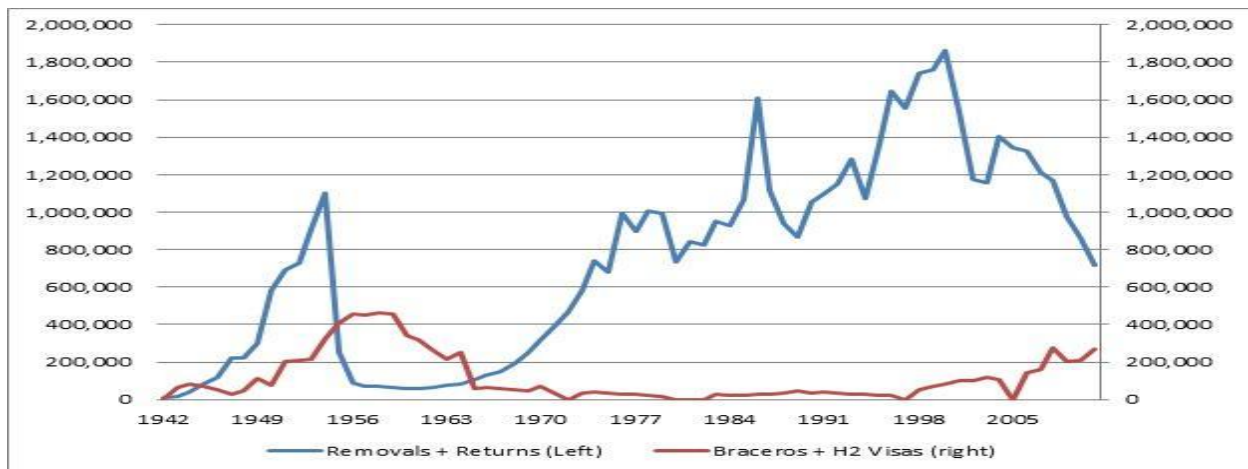
Second, the visa was also very easy for Mexican migrants to access and guaranteed that they would not have to work illegally and face the possibility of deportation. Over the course of the Bracero program, the INS and Border Patrol progressively removed the Mexican government from selecting the bracero migrants and moved toward a model where U.S. growers selected

their workers – often based on previous experience with the individual migrant. Removing the Mexican government from the process decreased opportunities for corruption and abuse of the workers. When the Mexican government was actively involved in selecting the Mexicans who could work in the United States prior to the reforms in 1951, the migrant often had to pay a mordida– a bribe – to Mexican officials. The migrant was then sent to a central processing center where he would have to pay yet another bribe to be considered.[xxxv] The Mexican government was frustrated when the U.S. government allowed American growers to unilaterally recruit braceros, but cutting out the Mexican government middleman likely saved braceros a lot of money and headaches.

From 1955 to 1960, annual bracero migration fluctuated between 400,000 and 450,000[xxxvi] and replaced the roughly two million unauthorized immigrants who moved to the United States after World War II. During this time, the government allowed braceros to work in virtually every sector of agriculture[xxxvii] The Bracero guest worker visa program, more so than any immigration enforcement system, practically eliminated unauthorized immigration.

A Border Patrol official warned that if the Bracero program was ever “repealed or a restriction placed on the number of braceros allowed to enter the United States, we can look forward to a large increase in the number of illegal alien entrants into the United States.”[xxxviii] That official’s prediction came true. When the Bracero program was ended in 1965 and not replaced by another effective lower skilled guest worker visa program, unlawful immigration as measured by the number of removals and returns skyrocketed (see Figure 1).

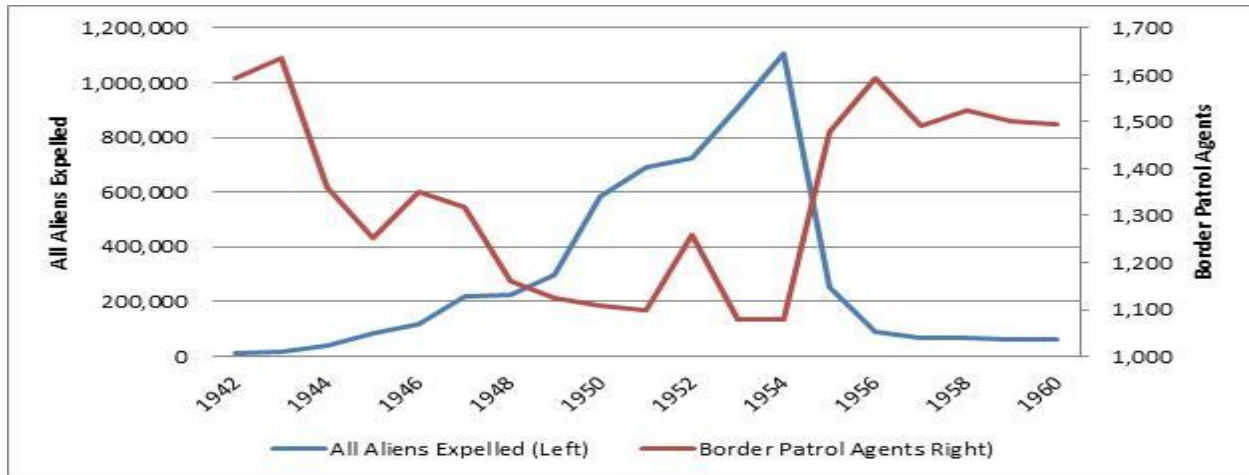
Removals and Returns of Unlawful Immigrants and Numbers of Guest Worker Visas, 1942-2011



One legal worker on a visa seems to be worth more than one unauthorized immigrant worker – meaning a favorable trade off for those concerned about the number of guest workers who could migrate if a large guest worker program was implemented. In 1954, one guest worker visa replaced 3.4 unauthorized immigrants, meaning that one legal worker seemed to be equal to more than three illegal workers (see Figure 1). That far fewer “physically able, adult male”

braceros could do the same quantity of work as several illegal workers was even noted at the time.[xxxix] If an important goal of a lower skilled guest worker visa is to eliminate the American economic demand for unauthorized immigrants, relatively fewer guest worker visas can replace a much larger unauthorized immigrant population.

Figure 2 indicates that increased numbers of Border Patrol and border enforcement were unnecessary to get this result. When the government launched Operation Wetback and expanded the Bracero program, the number of border patrol agents did increase but only to a previous high.



By allowing unauthorized immigrants to get work visas, by not punishing them or employers for coming forward, and by making work visas available to future migrants, almost all future and current unauthorized immigrants can be funneled into the legal market without a large increase in enforcement. This was the policy followed in the 1950s and it worked.

Clearly Operation Wetback should not be a guide for future enforcement policy because its racially discriminatory and harsh enforcement policies were unethical and legally unsound. However, a new guest worker visa program combined with a refocused immigration enforcement system that seeks to channel unlawful and new migrants onto the guest worker visa could be effective.

End of Bracero and Re-Ignition of Unlawful Immigration

By the time of Bracero’s cancellation in 1964, increasing regulations promulgated by the Department of Labor (DOL) and restrictions whittled the number of Bracero guest worker visas down to just 200,000 that year.[xli] New DOL wage regulations and labor certification raised costs for farmers and migrants, incentivizing them to move into the informal, underground economy.[xlii] By making lawful employment of migrants so expensive, the government created unauthorized immigration. Since 1964, very few lower skilled workers have been allowed in and

the unauthorized immigrant population has skyrocketed. Ending Bracero did not end temporary worker migration to the United States; it merely made such migration illegal.[xlii]

After cancellation of the Bracero program, the H-2 guest worker visa became the source of legal foreign agricultural workers. The H-2 was underused relative to the Bracero program because of complex rules, numerical restrictions, and the cost of sponsoring migratory workers.[xliii] The H-2 visa was initially created through the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 for “other temporary workers” not covered by the Bracero program.[xliv] From 1964 until 1986, mostly temporary unauthorized Mexican migration filled the gap left by the repeal of the Bracero program, which was unfilled by the H-2 visa.[xlv] After the end of Bracero, the modern age of unlawful immigration began as Figure 1 shows. The rest is history.

Conclusion

Mr. Trump is correct that unauthorized immigration decreased markedly in the 1950s, but he is wrong to attribute all or even most of that to increased enforcement under the utterly inhumane Operation Wetback. That operation would have been a complete failure if there was not a Bracero guest worker visa available to provide a legal avenue for lower skilled migration. The Bracero program had a lot of problems, and any modern visa program would have to be very different, but it was better than the black market alternative. Border Patrol and INS agents at the time credited Bracero with ending unlawful immigration and predicted, correctly, that ending Bracero would reignite it. Despite what Mr. Trump says, the lesson from the 1950s is not that harsh and inhumane immigration enforcement is effective, it is that a legal migration pathway can halt unlawful immigration.

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