



# Has immigration fallen off the administration's radar? Not a chance

**Enforced as executive orders, Trump's hardline policies are proceeding, against will of the people**

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Across the nation, for most Americans the three primary issues of concern right now are the coronavirus pandemic, jobs and economy, followed by health care costs. This finding by the American Election Eve Poll was consistent for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Latinos, Native Americans and white Americans. Among Black Americans, while the pandemic was indeed the primary source of worry, issues of discrimination and racial equity came ahead of jobs and economy.

Compared to the 2016 elections, when immigration was a key driver of voting behavior, the issue has lost currency for most voters at least at this urgent moment.

There are two reasons for this. One, the damage caused to our country by COVID-19 has stressed every one of us. And two, it is immigrants who are on the frontlines delivering resources and connecting and enabling us in this new pandemic afflicted world, when breathing the same air as another is a matter of deadly import.

But as insidiously as a microbe, the current administration's hardline immigration policies architected by Donald Trump's aide, Steven Miller, have been proceeding as planned, circumventing the will of the people, enforced as they are as executive orders.

The most heinous among them is the child separation or the Zero Tolerance policy. Three years after this policy went into effect, the parents of 545 children are still desperately, frantically searching for their sons and daughters. During one of the recent presidential debates, President Trump was asked about this particular policy, and he responded by painting family asylum with the brush of criminal intent. "Children are brought here by coyotes and lots of bad people, cartels, and they're brought here and it's easy to use them to get into our country," he said. This has always been his devious ploy: to conflate a humane policy with criminal intent and tainting it in the eyes of the public.

In 2018, Indecline, an activist art collective in San Francisco, transformed the 1-800-Got-Junk "We make junk disappear" billboard in Emeryville into an art editorial with the message: "We make kids disappear" signed I.C.E., giving voice to the utter horror, dismay and disgust that San Franciscans felt at this ever so cruel policy.

Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration analyst at Cato Institute, elaborated on some of the other immigration policies that have been slashed, modified or completely halted.

Both the refugee and asylum policies have been curtailed. The refugee cap, the upper limit of refugee admissions, was adjusted from 85,000 refugees per year in 2016 to 18,000 in 2019, and only about 11,000 refugees were actually admitted last year — well under the cap.

Nowrasteh said that the main justification offered for this reduction in refugee admissions was national security. “There was a fear that refugees, particularly Muslim refugees from the Syrian civil war and elsewhere were a very serious terrorist threat to the United States.”

However, the numbers don’t support this reasoning. From 1975 to 2017, there were only three people killed by refugees on American soil, and all three incidents happened in the late ‘70s. So that works out to 1 in 3.8 billion per year, estimated Nowrasteh, which goes to show that there might be other biases behind this policy curtailment.

America’s asylum policy saw many changes, too, over the last few years. The Southwest border has virtually shut down, and many more restrictions and legal barriers have been put into place for asylum seekers. Asylees have not been allowed to wait for their court dates in the United States. According to Nowrasteh, “You have this situation where there are essentially refugee camps on the U.S. border, in Mexico, of course.”

Additionally, in response to COVID-19, the government has shut down every guest worker visa program, except the H-2A program, a seasonal agricultural worker program. In short, legal immigration has been squeezed.

According to David J. Bier, another Cato Institute analyst, “At no time since it has maintained records has the country witnessed as fast a decline in legal immigration as it has seen in the second half of the fiscal year 2020.” (The year finished Sept. 30.) Ninety-two percent fewer legal immigrants came to the country in the second half of 2020 as compared to the first half. An unprecedented drop.

The government raised the wages for H-1B workers to deter foreign workers from coming into the United States, even at a time when high-skilled H-1B tech workers are lowering the cost of technology services across the country, making it possible for us to work at home without disruption.

To consider how far-reaching the termination of even smaller visa programs can be, Nowrasteh mentioned the suspended J-1 visa program. Au pairs fall under this visa category. Au pairs are foreign students who live with a host family and provide reliable childcare for working mothers.

This isn’t a huge visa, Nowrasteh acknowledged. It is not used by a large number of people.

Overwhelmingly, it is used by higher-skilled women, mothers with jobs and careers. The au pair program provides them with the opportunity to be both mother and a wage earner. “If my goal were to keep high-skilled American women out of the labor force, this would be one way to do it,” Nowrasteh remarked.

In 2021, after President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris are sworn in, perhaps there will be room for debate in Congress about reinstating some of these immigration missteps and considering immigration reform as the lasting way forward. Though, given Congress’ track record, I’m not holding my breath.