



The Poynter Institute

Joe Biden's claim about Donald Trump's 'slow' travel restriction needs context

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President Donald Trump routinely claims that he went against everyone's wishes when he decided to restrict travel from China to curb the spread of the coronavirus in the United States. Because he did, and fast, thousands of lives were saved, Trump says.

But Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, said Trump's response wasn't all that quick.

Biden told ABC's George Stephanopoulos on April 5 that Trump trailed dozens of other countries in issuing travel restrictions on China. (This was a week before Stephanopoulos confirmed he had COVID-19.)

"He indicated that I complimented him on dealing with China. Well, you know, 45 nations had already moved to keep, block China's personnel from being able to come to the United States before the president moved," Biden said. "It's about pace. It's about the urgency. And I don't think there's been enough of it, urgency."

PolitiFact decided to put Biden's claim on the Truth-O-Meter. Taken literally, Biden's statement that 45 countries blocked Chinese personnel from "being able to come to the United States" doesn't make sense — the countries were dealing with travel from China into their own countries, of course. Biden's campaign did not provide an on-the-record clarification.

Based on the context of the interview, Biden's point was that 45 nations imposed restrictions on travel from China before the United States' own restriction, therefore the United States was slow on this front. We found that the United States acted around the same time as did many other countries. It wasn't the first to restrict travel from China, but it wasn't the last, either.

Timeline of restrictions on travel from China

COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the new coronavirus, was first detected in Wuhan, China, and was reported by Chinese authorities to the World Health Organization on Dec. 31, 2019.

On Jan. 30, the World Health Organization declared a public health emergency of international concern over the coronavirus outbreak.

On Jan. 31, the Trump administration announced the United States would temporarily ban the admission of people who were in China 14 days prior to their attempted travel to the United States. The restriction took effect Feb. 2, and it exempted U.S. citizens, green card holders, and certain other people.

What was the rest of the world considering? We consulted Think Global Health, an initiative of the U.S.-based Council on Foreign Relations that is tracking travel restrictions on China due to COVID-19.

By the group's count, Biden is correct about 45 nations restricting travel from China before the United States. That number covers variations of travel restrictions in effect up to and including Feb. 1.

Think Global Health's tracker includes partial or total land border closures, suspension of flights to and from China, visa restrictions, such as a pause on visa-on-arrival programs, and entry restrictions (similar to what the United States implemented).

"While the United States was not one of the first countries to impose restrictions against travel from China, nor was it late to do so relative to the actions of others," said Samantha Kiernan, a research associate at the Council on Foreign Relations. "Rather, the United States acted around the same time that many other countries did."

The Marshall Islands is among nations that had travel restrictions on China even before the World Health Organization's Jan. 30 declaration. After the declaration, many countries, including the United States, announced their own travel restrictions.

For perspective, the U.S. measure went into effect after Italy on Jan. 31 suspended all flights to and from China, but it happened before South Korea's entry restriction that started Feb. 4.

There are many ways to slice the numbers on travel restrictions, said Alex Nowrasteh, director of immigration studies at the libertarian Cato Institute. In a March 23 blog post, Nowrasteh estimated that at least 36 other countries imposed travel restrictions on people coming from China around the same time as the United States.

"Some countries, for instance, began forcing Chinese nationals to get a visa around this time whereas before they were allowed visa-free entry," Nowrasteh said. "That's an additional travel restriction, but a less onerous one than that imposed by President Trump."

Nowrasteh agreed that the United States' restriction wasn't far behind from others.

"There are many points on which to criticize the Trump administration's response to COVID-19, but they were not slow in instituting a travel ban on China," Nowrasteh said. "The real question is whether that restriction worked and there is little evidence to suggest that it did."

Global health specialists told Kaiser Health News that there is little to no evidence that Trump's restrictions restrained COVID-19, because they came too late and didn't have the follow-up necessary to make a real dent.

Research suggests that well-implemented travel restrictions can buy time, but that time has to be used effectively — to ramp up emergency preparedness and bolster activities like testing and isolating people who may have been exposed.

As late as Feb. 29, the WHO advised against travel or trade restrictions related to COVID-19 outbreaks, saying: "Travel bans to affected areas or denial of entry to passengers coming from affected areas are usually not effective in preventing the importation of cases but may have a significant economic and social impact."

Our ruling

Biden claimed that "45 nations had already moved" to enforce travel restrictions with China "before the president moved."

The extent of travel restrictions vary — from the suspension of visa programs to entry denial. According to one tracker of travel restrictions, Biden's 45 figure checks out. Other research shows that the number is around 36.

Where Biden misleads is on the relative speed of the U.S. compared with others. The U.S. travel restriction came shortly after the WHO declared a public health emergency and around the same time as other nations, experts said.

Biden's statement that Trump's travel restriction was slower than 45 other countries is partially accurate but leaves out important details or takes things out of context. We rate it Half True.