



House candidates agree, temporary work visas might be way out of migrant crisis

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Immigration has been a constant theme in the race for Texas' 23rd Congressional District.

The district includes more than 800 miles of border with Mexico and has seen its share of immigration crises in the last two years. That included the 2021 standoff between border agents and Haitians in Del Rio and numerous migrant street releases in Eagle Pass.

Incumbent U.S. Rep. Tony Gonzales, R-Texas, and his Democratic challenger John Lira vigorously disagree on what led to the record 4 million unauthorized Southwest border crossings in fiscal years 2021 through 2022. Was it a perception of open borders under the Biden administration? Is it the release of pent-up demand after four years of tough enforcement by the Trump administration as well as other countries' economies slow to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic?

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One thing both candidates agree on is the urgency to ramp up temporary work visas.

"Border security shouldn't be a Republican or a Democrat issue. Everyone deserves to feel safe in their own homes," said Gonzales, a former U.S. Navy cryptologist. "At the same time, there are a lot of people that are fleeing hell, that go through hell to get to the U.S. But that hell doesn't end if they came over illegally."

Venezuelan migrants 'endured hell' on their way to U.S.

Gonzales proposes speeding up hearings for the massive number of daily unauthorized border crossers, many of whom are fleeing poverty – not political persecution – elsewhere. Right now, about half are being expelled to Mexico under the Title 42 public health order while many others are released with notices to appear in immigration court later.

"I would do two things: first, get people immigration hearings within days, instead of years, and get those who don't qualify for asylum back to their country of origin. Once that happens, it's proven time after time that the illegal immigration crisis stops. Second, I would increase work visas."

Research by the nonpartisan Cato Institute shows the U.S. issued 1.2 million fewer work visas in from March 2020 through July 2021 compared to a similar period in 2018 and 2019.

Challenger Lira says he supports legal immigration, which includes the right to petition for asylum in the United States. He would also work to expand temporary work visa programs.

“Migrants have always been an important part of our economy and we should be welcoming them,” Lira said during a recent campaign stop in El Paso. “I talked to ranchers across Texas 23. They need a workforce and are saying, ‘Why are we turning them away?’ An asylum request may not be the appropriate way, maybe it is temporary work visas to add to our economy, help our farms, our ranches, our factories, then go back to their families and come back the next season.”

Lira, a retired Marine, doesn’t favor an enforcement-only approach he says is ineffective and has turned into a Republican political tool. Even local politicians like Texas Gov. Greg Abbott abuse it, he said.

‘We’re going to have some issues’: Operation Lone Star soldiers owe federal taxes after internal error

“I would tell the governor that the southern border is the jurisdiction of the federal government and to stay out of our way,” Lira said. “Operation Lone Star has been a tremendous failure. Pulling troops from their family and from their work, giving them a mission that has no end in sight, messing up on their pay [...] They have no jurisdiction, no real mission, they’re just standing guard and being used as political pawns.”

He also accused his opponent of “downgrading and criticizing” border communities during the migrant crisis. “He tries to paint them as terrorist havens and nothing but drug rings operating down there,” Lira said. “They’re good, honest people trying to make a living. What is that going to do for our tourism, for our businesses?”

Gonzales said many Democratic politicians insist on ignoring the immigration crisis and refuse to come to the border to see how things really are.

“What I’ve seen in the last year and a half – almost two years – is a border crisis that gets worse and worse. Eagle Pass and Del Rio were at the epicenter of the crisis and now it’s El Paso,” Gonzales said, referring to the 26,000 paroled migrants, mostly Venezuelans, that the Border Patrol released here in September. “What people don’t realize is Ciudad Juarez and El Paso are one community. If you deport someone from the U.S. to Mexico and they’re on the Juarez side and still need help and resources, it impacts all of us.”

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Since the Biden administration on Oct. 12 did an about-face on admitting Venezuelan asylum seekers, thousands have been expelled under Title 42 to Mexico. Around 500 of them are now staying at a tent camp across the Rio Grande in Juarez. Some of the Venezuelans at the camp earlier this week took a protest across the Rio Grande and were pushed back by border

agents firing pepper balls after someone threw a rock at an agent. The city of El Paso, meantime, is still waiting on the reimbursement for most of the \$8.9 million it has spent on migrant housing, meals, hotels and busing this year.

“Instead of encouraging people to come under the bridge, why doesn’t America encourage people to come through the front doors? That is where this administration has failed. That is what I’m committed to doing: making sure people are safe in their own homes, having a secure border but also a country that is warm and welcoming to those who want to come in and live the American dream,” Gonzales said.