

## Making Sense of the Immigration Turmoil

Peter Rousmaniere

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First, take a long view. About every 50 years since the late 19th century, the United States has wavered between a generally open-borders approach to immigration and a restrictionist approach. Passage of immigration reform in 1965 began an era of relatively open borders. Today's fiercely restrictionist rhetoric arrives about on time.

But the country has never been of one mind when it comes to welcoming the foreign-born. Historically, both major parties had been sundered by internal divisions over immigration policy. That has changed, since the mid-2000s, when sentiment began to separate Republicans from Democrats. Donald Trump's 2016 victory put into the White House someone eager to control the topic through executive branch initiatives and his own rhetoric.

It became apparent during 2017 that Trump intended to use the immigration issue as his main theme running up to the 2018 midterm elections. It also became apparent that he was not interested in comprehensive immigration reform legislation, or for that matter any major initiative by Congress, especially one that was bipartisan.

The Trump rhetoric is impossible to miss. His administrative initiatives, however, often involve bureaucratic processes and policies that are impenetrable except to immigration insiders. These insiders can point to more than a dozen policy changes, even before considering what may be happening on the U.S.-Mexico border.

Trump was on solid political ground with his hard restrictionist approach. That's because Republicans are predisposed to be angry about immigration, for two reasons:

First, they are far more pessimistic about the value of immigration than are Democrats. In the past 10 years, the Democrats' view of immigration as strengthening the country has shot up from about 50 percent to the high 70s. Republican sentiment for this notion has remained flat at about 35 percent. This divergence, which began to appear during the George W. Bush administration, appears to lock the parties into opposite fixed positions.

Second, Republicans are far more likely than Democrats to be riled up about illegal immigration, and also about crime. Some of the first words spoken by Trump as a candidate merged the two issues.

The libertarian-leaning Cato Institute concluded from 2014 data that legal immigrants had a rate of incarceration that is 31 percent of that of native-born Americans; illegal immigrants had a rate that was 56 percent of natives.

Despite this evidence to the contrary, Trump has shown all along a proclivity to equate illegal immigration with crime as if they were the same thing. In a poll, 80 percent of Democrats say that the crackdown on illegal immigration is bad and 81 percent of Republicans say it is good.

Trump likely perceives that Democrats are vulnerable in part because they have a hard time addressing the matter of the approximately 11 million undocumented immigrants in the country.

What has happened in the past few weeks has impaired the administration's messaging on the crackdown as it relates to the Mexico border.

The administration evidently expected that illegal border crossings would subside from the levels experienced in the past 10 years. Border Patrol figures for the past few months have shown that is not the case.

If one uses federal estimates of successful illegal crossings drawn on the basis of arrests, then at least 100,000 people, and perhaps many more, will successfully enter illegally through this border during 2018. This news tarnishes the administration's image of being effective when past administrations were not.

But the main disruption to the administration's restrictionist strategy came from its own policy to separate children from the parents arrested at the border. Whenever kids and mothers are involved as collateral damage in crackdowns, the media explodes with stories. A raid on a New Bedford, Mass., backpack manufacturing plant in 2007 prompted news stories about grief-stricken mothers. A Boston businessman paid the bail for hundreds of those arrested.

More recently, in April, an U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement raid on a meatpacking plant in Bean Station, Tenn., resulted in national news stories about how 600 children failed to show up at local public schools the following day.

Now it turns out that Democrats are viewed as more competent on the immigration issue than Republicans. An early June poll by the Pew Research Center revealed that 48 percent of those polled said Democrats could do a better job dealing with immigration, compared with 34 percent in favor of Republicans. This may mean that, as long as immigration remains on the front page, as long as Trump talks about it, Democratic candidates are advantaged.

Behind the scenes, bureaucratic initiatives move apace in the administration. But they can be hard to grasp.

Aside from rhetoric, the public face of the administration may be one of paralysis — not what the president planned.