# Preface

## The Perennial Immigration Dilemma

Immigration is among the most controversial issues of 2025, as pundits, journalists, researchers, and the public debate and ponder the ethics and morality of immigration policies, and the benefits and perils of isolationism. This newest saga in America's perennial immigration debate comes at the confluence of many different factors. Increasing migration pressure, stemming from climate-related instability and governmental turbulence has driven migration across the world, while the United States has been in the grips of a now decade-long anti-immigration campaign, driven largely by unsubstantiated propaganda and misinformation, that has gradually shaped attitudes about migration towards the negative, and has built support for extremist isolationism.[1]

## Going Back to the Past, to Understand the Present

The modern moment in immigration is as much a product of the past as the future. Over the years, American attitudes about immigration have been shaped by several converging and sometimes competing factors. Understanding these factors helps to demonstrate why trends in immigration attitudes occur.

## Immigration Is Driven by Demand First, Not Supply

Immigration does not arise because there are people who want to get in, but because there are people in the United States who will hire them. If there were no American citizens willing to employ migrant laborers, or even undocumented migrants, migration rates would quickly fall. In every immigration era, it was the availability of jobs that brought migrants to America, and though the nature of these jobs has changed, it is the job market, *demand* for labor that plays the dominant role. In the 1800s, it was the railroads, the mining companies, and the factories that needed laborers, and huge number of migrants from Europe came to fill these jobs. In modern America, undocumented migrants work as cleaners, in service jobs, and in agricultural fields, occupying the lowest level of the employment spectrum, due to their status and inability to legally demand benefits or increased status in the workplace.[2]

If it is the employers, rather than the employees, that drive migration patterns, why isn't the debate focused on prohibiting the hiring of migrants, rather than focused on things like border patrol or rounding up migrants for deportation? The reasons for this are political. Anti-migration rhetoric and activism comes from the political right, but the owners of companies that hire undocumented migrants, especially in the agricultural industries, also skew right and form an important voting block for conservative politicians. As a result, conservatives have played a

tenuous game for many years, promoting anti-immigration rhetoric to their voting base, and thus appealing to isolationists and anti-migrant conservatives in general, while trying to limit the impact of anti-migrant policies on constituents who depend on this labor force.

One of the key points made by anti-immigration activists and citizens is that the jobs that migrants occupy could be occupied by American citizens. Wouldn't this be a better way forward for the country? Well, the problems with this are many and varied. Companies that use temporary workers, migrant workers, and undocumented migrants do so primarily to save on labor costs. Hiring American citizens for these same jobs would, quite simply, cost more. This raises the question of who bears the burden of these increased costs? Should the business owners take the hit? Accepting reduced profits and salaries for themselves and managers in order to keep costs low for consumers? One might think that this would be fitting and appropriate, but, in practice, this rarely happens. Companies set their prices based on the prices of their competitors, and the costs of production, not on the welfare of consumers. More often than not, producers increase costs for consumers, when they experience an increase in production costs.

This is the central problem for anti-immigration advocates. If prices increase for consumers, consumers will naturally wonder why. In general, they will have no idea why costs are higher and will not be able to figure it out, but they will blame their elected officials nonetheless. Thus politicians who want to use anti-immigration sentiment to build their own support and power base, must be careful to limit changes to consumer prices. In practice, this has meant that politicians and officials limit their interference with businesses using migrants laborers, and concentrate, instead, on limiting the flow and movement of migrants. This can be seen in the Trump administration's migration strategies of 2025, where the administration has specifically taken steps to limit the impact of their deportation scheme on "Red States" and agricultural companies, where employers tend to support conservative politicians.[3] Trump therefore superficially satisfies the anti-migration desires of one portion of his base, while limiting the disruption to businesses and business owners who might be supporters. This political game is not new to the Trump administration, though it has rarely been as blatant, but has been occurring since the immigration drama of the 1840s and 1850s, when politicians called for the deportation of Irish migrants, but rarely punished the many employers who hired migrant laborers from Ireland and elsewhere, fueling the immigration boom of that era that brought millions of European economic migrants to American shores.

## Racism and Xenophobia Fuel Anti-Immigration Sentiment

There are anti-immigrant activists and advocates who are *not* motivated by racism, but those who do harbor racist and xenophobic attitudes are, predictably, also attracted to isolationism and controlling immigration, especially when it comes to preventing the migration of individuals from racial groups about which

# Understanding Immigration—Past and Present

Members of the Trump administration have claimed that immigration constitutes a national emergency, but why? Trump officials claim that migrants pose a threat to the nation's economy, that they are taking jobs from nonmigrant Americans, and that they are bringing crime. The administration claims, therefore, that migration constitutes a national security and economic emergency, and this is being used to justify blanket migration bans targeting specific countries, billions in spending on a massive wall along the US-Mexico border. Experts have refuted the veracity of the Trump administration's claims about the threat of migration, but this has done little to change the rhetoric. Those concerned about immigration or the fate of migrants might wonder why this is happening?

## The Nature of the Debate

The Trump administration's claims about the dangers of immigration are nothing new in American politics. Over the centuries, politicians have regularly and frequently used immigration as the basis of a fruitful political strategy in which they promote the idea that "foreign elements" of some kind pose a threat to American security or prosperity, then offer themselves and their party as the solution, the bulwark that will keep Americans safe from this alleged threat. This strategy works because it plays on innate psychological prejudices.

To survive, over the millennia, humans have learned to differentiate insiders, those who belonged to their societies, from outsiders, those who came from somewhere outside of their society. It is natural for humans to be wary of outsiders, who might bring previously unknown dangers, and this general distrust of outside elements manifests in every aspect of human society.

In some cases, outsiders may be feared because it is believed they will bring violence or that they are more likely to commit crime. This perception emerges from the sense that insiders, members of a community, are more committed to the community, and thus less likely to violate the rules of the community, while outsiders have fewer attachments and will therefore be less respectful of rules and other members of the community. In other cases, fear of outsiders may be based on fear of foreign disease. This can be quite literal as when the US government banned travel during the COVID-19 crisis in an effort to avoid bringing new strains of the global pandemic into the United States. A similar fear focuses on outsiders bringing dangerous ideas or cultural practices, rather than literal germs. Opponents of migration have often focused on the idea that migrants will "not fit in" or will "not assimilate," and this is all a reflection of the fear of change

and of losing aspects of one's culture or tradition that one believes to be important.

On the more practical level, people fear outsiders because they are protective of what they feel is theirs. Think of how residents of a city or town are sometimes hostile or at least annoyed by tourists and visitors from other towns or communities. This manifests from a sense of personal belonging and ownership over a certain area or territory, and the resources and benefits available in that territory. Those who have embraced a feeling of ownership and entitlement with regard to a certain area, whether by effort or by a simple accident of birth, can come to resent those who take advantage of the resources or benefits that they feel should belong to them. This is often the central issue in the migration debate—the perception that arriving migrants will take resources that those who already have citizenship feel should belong to them. This can manifest in concern over migrants "stealing jobs," or it can manifest in the idea that migrants are less deserving of the broader economic resources.

It is widely claimed, in the migration debate of the 2020s, for instance, that migrants are easily able to obtain false documentation that allows them to exploit the American welfare and economic assistance program. This is false, and studies have shown that migrants very rarely manage to secure access to these benefits, but the claim inspires anger from Americans who feel a sense that the limited resources available to them and those like them are being taken from them by outsiders, people who are underserving, people who aren't like them, people they don't know, and so don't trust...or care about.

Care is also at the center of the debate. From the Colonial Era to the modern day, the immigration debate, beyond the economic discussions and alleged national security concerns, is about how Americans perceive value in other humans. Over the years, many migrants who have come to or attempted to come to the United States have come fleeing war, famine, or oppression. They have come, not because they are opportunistic grifters seeking to take American resources, but because they need a way to escape from dangerous or unlivable situations in their current places of residence. In the 2020s, for instance, many thousands of the migrants arriving at the nation's southern border are individuals and families fleeing violence and persecution in Central America. They often come bringing dependent children, or, at least, hoping to find work so that they can transfer resources back to their family members in need. But Americans are divided, on the most fundamental level, about how much they care about the difficulties these migrants are facing.

While some Americans care a great deal, even dedicating their lives to helping migrants trying to escape horrendous poverty, violence, and warfare in their home countries, others do not care at all what happens to migrants or their families. During the first Trump administration, hundreds of migrants were separated from their children, with the children held in other facilities while their mothers and fathers were detained elsewhere. Administration officials who supported the family separation policy saw the act as a preventative, a consequence for those who crossed the

# U.S. Postwar Immigration Policy 1952–2025

*Council on Foreign Relations*, 2025

Immigration has been an important element of U.S. economic and cultural vitality since the country's founding. This timeline outlines the evolution of U.S. immigration policy after World War II.

## 1952

### Quota System Upheld

As the Cold War deepens, the U.S. government consolidates its immigration and naturalization laws into one comprehensive federal policy. The McCarran-Walter Act ends policies stemming from the late nineteenth century designed to exclude Asian immigrants. However, the bill upholds the ethnicity-based quota system for new immigrants that favored white Europeans, revising limitations to admit one-sixth of 1 percent of each group already in the United States. President Harry Truman vetoes the bill, citing discrimination against Asian immigrants and decrying the "absurdity, the cruelty of carrying over into this year of 1952 the isolationist limitations of our 1924 law." Congress overrides him to pass it.

## 1954

### Eisenhower Launches "Operation Wetback"

The postwar period causes a swell of illegal immigration to the United States from Mexico, with an estimated three million undocumented Mexicans in the country working mostly in agricultural jobs at significantly lower wages than what American workers receive. Under growing public pressure to act, the Immigration and Naturalization Service under President Dwight D. Eisenhower enacts a nationwide sweep of undocumented Mexican immigrants in the southwestern United States. The sweep, officially termed "Operation Wetback," authorizes 1,075 Border Patrol agents, along with local law enforcement, to target barrios in California, Arizona, and Texas.

## 1956

### Hungarian Revolution Fails

Hungary's failed revolt against Soviet control triggers an outpouring of refugees. The Eisenhower administration uses a provision in the McCarran-Walter immi-

gration act authorizing the admission of aliens on a temporary basis under emergency conditions. Eisenhower employs parole powers—presidential authority to take unilateral action in emergencies—included in the immigration act to admit around thirty thousand Hungarian refugees. By 1960, more than two hundred thousand Hungarian immigrants are accepted into the country, and Eisenhower's use of parole powers marks a precedent used in later decades to grant tens of thousands of refugees from around the world asylum in the United States.

## 1959

### Cuban Exodus

Fidel Castro and his guerrilla forces overthrow the government of Fulgencio Batista in Cuba in January 1959 and set up a new communist order, resulting in a mass exodus of Cubans to the United States as political refugees. The first wave includes political supporters of Batista, as well as members of Cuba's elite and middle class, who largely settle in Florida's Miami-Dade County. The United States eventually enacts the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act to allow permanent resident status to Cuban refugees who arrive after 1959. About one million Cubans emigrate to the United States between 1959 and 1990.

## 1964

### Sunset on the Bracero Program

Amid mounting pressure from labor activists and welfare organizations, the U.S. government lets its Mexican guest worker program expire after twenty-two years. The Bracero program, instituted in a bilateral agreement in 1942 amid anticipation of a labor shortage in World War II, gave contracts to Mexican workers to be employed in the U.S. agricultural sector. During its operation, about 4.5 million contracts were signed for workers to come to the United States. Although the program stipulates that braceros are entitled to certain provisions—including equal wages to native workers, free housing, affordable meals, and insurance—these rules are broken by many employers. Many of the farm workers are reported to receive a fraction of the wages of American laborers. Lee G. Williams, the last director of the program under the Department of Labor, refers to the system as "legalized slavery." The end of the Bracero program results in an acceleration of illegal immigration across the border.

## 1965

### Leaving the 1920s System Behind

In the midst of the civil rights movement, the government shifts federal immigration legislation away from the quota system and 1920s standards, deemed by President Lyndon B. Johnson as "un-American in the highest sense." The 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act instead sets up a system of preferences, placing an emphasis on family reunification. President Johnson, signing the bill at the foot of the Statue of Liberty, declares that the legislation "is not a revolutionary bill and does not affect the lives of millions." However, the bill—through the fam-

# Alien and Sedition Acts Were Reviled in Their Time, and John Adams Was Not Sorry to See Them Go

By Marianne Holdzkom
*The Conversation*, March 12, 2025

When John Adams became the second president of the United States in 1797, he inherited from George Washington a new experiment in government and a bit of a mess. The country's two political parties—the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans—were increasingly hostile to one another, and the young nation was sinking deeper into a foreign policy crisis with its onetime ally France.

Adams' Federalist Party wanted to fight; the Democratic-Republicans did not. As the situation with France, caused by the seizure of American merchant ships, deteriorated, Adams had to prepare his country for war.

In an attempt to silence the Federalists' political opponents, he signed the Sedition Act of 1798. The new law attempted to crack down on critical writings about government officials, and it was aimed at Democratic-Republican newspaper editors in particular.

Signing the Sedition Act was a reputation-ruining decision. This one act painted Adams as a man who put national security and his reputation above freedom of speech and the press. Yet the real story behind the Sedition Act, which I know from my work as a John Adams and American Revolution scholar, reveals a more complicated calculus.

At a time when the current presidential administration is tightening control of the media and even invoking the Alien Enemies Act of 1798—which Adams signed into law alongside the Sedition Act – it is important to understand this first attempt to control what kind of news the American people received.

## Little Choice But to Sign

The Sedition Act made it illegal to "write, print, utter or publish ... any false, scandalous and malicious" statements, particularly those that might "stir up sedition within the United States, or to excite any unlawful combinations therein, for opposing or resisting any law of the United States."

It was one of four laws Congress passed in 1798 in an attempt to solve a perceived threat from the French and their supporters in the U.S. The other three acts affected immigrants, increasing residency requirements for citizenship from

five to 14 years and giving the president broad authority to detain or deport "aliens" deemed dangerous.

Collectively, this legislation is known as the Alien and Sedition Acts. The Democratic-Republicans opposed the whole package as unconstitutional, but it was the Sedition Act that tainted Adams' reputation.

I can't let Adams off the hook for restricting freedom of the press, even temporarily—the Sedition Act expired in 1801—but context is important.

While drafting the Bill of Rights two decades prior, James Madison and his congressional colleagues could not agree on the exact language for the First Amendment, which guarantees the rights to free speech and a free press. Between 1791, when it was adopted, and Adams' signing of the laws in 1798, no court case had put those rights to the test and hashed out its meaning.

In 1798, the question was: Should there be restrictions on these rights, or should the press have free rein to print whatever it wanted?

Neither Congress nor Adams knew exactly how to interpret the First Amendment. The Supreme Court would not take up freedom of speech and the press until decades later, in 1821.

## Reluctant Decision in a Crisis

My research and that of other scholars suggest that Adams was never an advocate of the Sedition Act. He neither asked for the legislation, nor did he lobby for it.

"I regret not the repeal of the Alien or Sedition Law, which were never favorites with me," he told his son in later life.

He never indicated why he made the poor decision to sign the law. But he was acting in a time of crisis, and I suspect he felt he had no choice. The U.S. was preparing for war. The newly built USS *Constitution* was ready to set sail for the Caribbean to protect American merchant ships from French privateers.

The Sedition Act wouldn't be the last time a fearful U.S. Congress preparing for war would try to silence opposition. In 1918, during World War I, Congress passed—and President Woodrow Wilson signed—a new Sedition Act that imposed harsh penalties for speech abusing the U.S. government, the flag, the Constitution or the military.

**The Supreme Court would not take up freedom of speech and the press until decades later, in 1821.**

Because the Sedition Act was used to silence critical media, historians and free press advocates tend to take a dim view of it. Scholars have described the Alien and Sedition Acts as "reprehensible," and many quote Thomas Jefferson, who feared they could mean the end of the republic.

"I consider these laws as merely an experiment on the American mind to see how far it will bear an avowed violation of the Constitution," wrote Jefferson, who succeeded Adams in 1801.

"If this goes down, we shall immediately see attempted another act of Congress declaring that the President shall continue in office during life [and] reserv-

# The State of Immigration

Immigration, and specifically what the Trump campaign terms "illegal immigration," but is otherwise called "unauthorized migration," has been the cornerstone of the Trump administration's proposed agenda. Focusing on the alleged economic drain of unauthorized migration, and the alleged crime and danger brought to American citizens by migrants, the Trump administration's immigration policies have been among the most aggressive of the past century.[1]

The Trump administration's initial executive orders included, among other things:

1. Declared a national emergency at the border, using authority under the National Emergencies Act (NEA). This empowers the executive to bypass congressional oversight to access emergency funding and to deploy military.
2. Halted refugee admissions. This is a repeat of Trump's 2017 executive order, which suspends the refugee resettlement program. Thousands of refugees already approved were therefore left in an uncertain state.
3. Ended the "catch- and-release" system in which migrants would be released from detention after being given a court date.
4. Ordered most non-Mexican immigrants and asylum seekers hoping to enter the U.S. to wait in Mexico for US hearings on their asylum cases.
5. Expanded the list of individuals targeted for deportation to include anyone who is in the country illegally, rather than only those who pose a security threat.
6. Redirected Homeland Security to focus primarily on immigration.
7. Expanded powers to "denaturalize" or to revoke the citizenship of individuals charged with certain offenses.
8. Planned to deploy military troops at the border.
9. Ordered for work to begin again on the "border wall."

A few of the Trump administration's programs were more unprecedented. He attempted to end birthright citizenship, which has long been a target of the far right, though this effort was blocked in the courts. He also ended and tried to recoup funding from federally funded organizations that support refugees and migrants, which is unusual in that most past presidents have avoided targeting efforts that were purely humanitarian and that aided in acclimation of refugees.

## Attitudes about Migration and Deportation

In the realm of public opinion, there is some confusion about the Trump administration's policies. Among the most controversial aspects was the administration's aggressive efforts to ramp up deportations. Social media videos of immigration

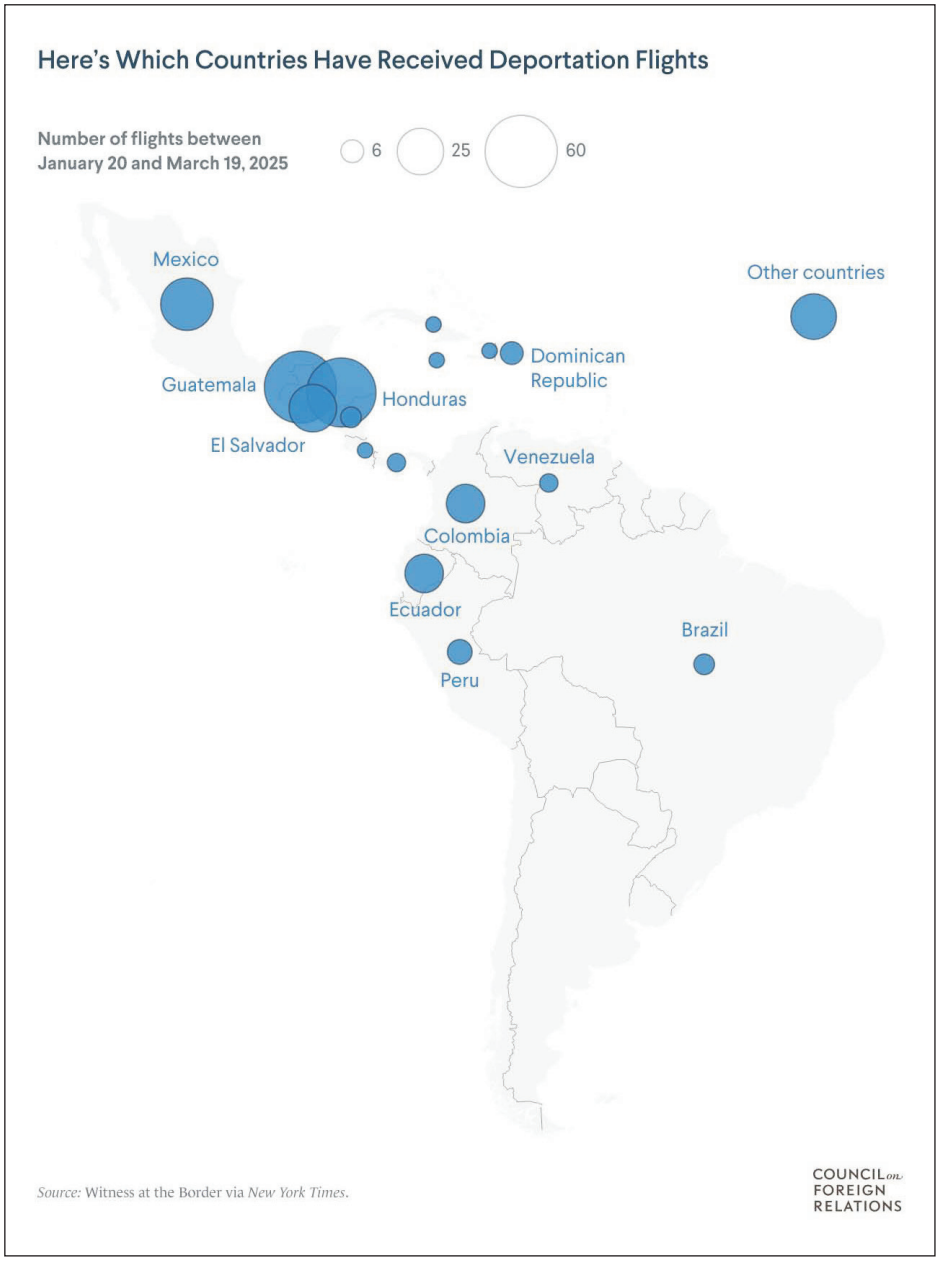
agents forcefully arresting individuals and having violent encounters with civilians have gone viral on social media platforms and have circulated through the mainstream media.

The Trump administration's extremely controversial decision to send federal troops to California in response to a protest against the deportation policy raised a number of questions. The action was blocked by a federal judge, but this block was later delayed by an appeals court considering the case. The last time the National Guard was deployed without a sitting governor's consent was during the Eisenhower administration, when the National Guard was deployed to protect Black students facing threats of violence when trying to attend a public school after the end of segregation. The State of California filed a lawsuit against the Trump administration, arguing, "At no point in the past three days has there been a rebellion or an insurrection. Nor have these protests risen to the level of protests or riots that Los Angeles and other major cities have seen at points in the past, including in recent years."[2]

Recent polling indicates a divided electorate, but also that opinions shift markedly depending on who Americans feel is being impacted or affected by these policies. Writing on *NPR*, Domenico Montanaro said, "Even though people say they are in favor of deporting people who do not have permanent legal status, there is a difference between the hardened criminal that the administration says it is focused on and hardworking community members..." Montanaro claimed that the Trump administration had some pushback from within the party, as well as from Democrats, because extreme policies drive public opinion.

This uncertainty is reflected in the polls, where support for deportations has been as high as 54 percent, but also as low as 44 percent. This ten-point swing is, in part, based on how questions are asked. When asked whether ALL migrants living in the United States illegally should be deported, support drops to only 32 percent. A deeper look by Pew Research in March of 2025 identified 51 percent of Americans who believed that "some" immigrants living in the United States illegally should be deported. But, within this group, opinions on who should be deported differed markedly when people were asked more specific questions. While 97 percent approved of deporting those who committed violent crimes, and a majority (52 percent) were willing to deport those guilty of nonviolent crimes, only 15 percent approved of deporting those who had a job already and only 9 percent supported those who came to the United States as children.[3] Further, among the public as a whole, strong majorities oppose deporting people from places of worship, schools, or hospitals. This sentiment is fully at odds with the Trump administration, which issued an executive order allowing immigration officials to arrest migrants at churches, schools, and hospitals.[4]

While Trump's immigration policies don't align with the views of most Americans, this extremist policy aligns with a strong majority of Republicans, who are also those who have most firmly embraced the Trump administration's claims that migration poses a national security threat. Overall, then, the policies excite and confirm the support of the Trump base, while not significantly, at least to




rights groups about how migrants are treated upon their arrival in other countries, such as El Salvador, where deportees have been transferred to the country's notorious mega prison—used by President Nayib Bukele in his campaign against gangs.

The Trump administration is also reportedly seeking agreements with several other countries, including those in Africa, Asia, and Europe.

# Border Crackdowns Won't Solve America's Immigration Crisis

By Hein de Haas
*Wall Street Journal*, March 1, 2024

This week's high-profile visits to the Texas border by President Biden and former President Trump were predictable campaign theater. Both candidates pointed an accusing finger at the other, assigning blame for a problem that deeply concerns many voters. The failure last month of the latest immigration reform package on Capitol Hill further highlights what has become a decades-old policy stalemate.

But the issue isn't going away, and neither party can afford to ignore the crisis. According to data from U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the number of border apprehensions rose from 1.86 million in the 2021 fiscal year to about 2.5 million in 2022 and about the same in 2023. The influx is overwhelming border communities and overstretching the asylum system, and the busing of migrants by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott to Democrat-run "sanctuary cities" has put pressure on blue states too.

How did we get here? The dominant narrative on the right has compared illegal immigration to an invasion, facilitated by criminal cartels and accepted by "open borders" liberals. On the left, an alternative narrative is that the surge in immigration is essentially driven by poverty, violence and other misery in origin countries, portraying migrants as refugees in need of protection.

But both narratives ignore the real reason for the border crisis: a hypocritical immigration system that refuses to acknowledge the U.S. economy's persistent need for lower-skilled labor. The rise in illegal immigration is mainly driven by unprecedented labor demand and the absence of legal channels to accommodate it. Tougher enforcement at the border is no solution to this mismatch. In fact, it is a big part of the problem. . . .

The border crisis dates back to policy changes in the late 1980s. Ronald Reagan's Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 was the last major bipartisan immigration reform. It provided amnesty to 2.7 million undocumented, mostly Mexican migrants. But it also fired the opening shot for increasing border surveillance and introduced sanctions for employers hiring undocumented workers.

Since then, successive Republican and Democratic administrations have invested massive resources in ramping up border surveillance and collaborating with countries of transit such as Mexico to deter migration. By 2023, the U.S.

# Index