

🕒 This article was published more than **5 years ago**

The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

Trump urges House GOP to fix immigration system, expresses no strong preference on rival bills amid uproar over family separations

By [Mike DeBonis](#), [Philip Rucker](#), [Seung Min Kim](#) and [John Wagner](#)

June 20, 2018 at 9:48 a.m. EDT

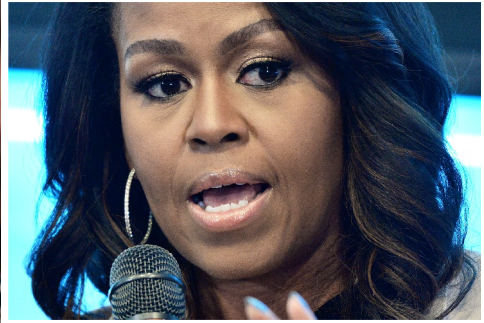
President Trump implored anxious House Republicans to fix the nation’s immigration system but did not offer a clear path forward amid the growing uproar over his administration’s decision to separate migrant families at the border.

Huddling with the GOP at the Capitol on Tuesday evening, Trump stopped short of giving a full-throated endorsement to immigration legislation meant to unite the moderate and conservative wings of the House Republican conference.

“He didn’t really tell us what bill to vote for,” said Rep. Markwayne Mullin (R-Okla.). He said Trump laid out his main principles on immigration and told Republicans he “wanted to take care of the kids” — a reference to the unfolding family separation crisis.

Trump has repeatedly defended his immigration crackdown, including forcibly separating migrant children from their parents as they arrive at the border. But images of young children housed in metal cages have set off a nationwide outcry that has reached the White House.

What lawmakers and other public figures are saying about the border separations



+12

administration's practice of separating children from their parents has drawn criticism from Republican makers and former first ladies.

Trump described for Republicans how his daughter Ivanka, a senior White House adviser, told him that the images from the border of families being separated were terrible, according to multiple GOP lawmakers who attended the session.

 **Follow** Election 2024

Follow

“Can we do anything to stop this?” Trump quoted her saying, according to one lawmaker.

The president’s reaction to his daughter’s remarks, the lawmaker said, was to call it a “tough issue” and push Congress to act: “We need to figure this out,” Trump said. “It’s a sad situation.”

Despite the president’s visit, there was no guarantee that the Republican-led Congress would pass any legislation on immigration, an issue that has exposed deep rifts in the GOP and threatens the party’s control of Congress in November’s midterm elections.

On Wednesday morning, Trump tried again to pin blame on Democrats, writing on Twitter that the country's immigration laws are "the weakest and worst anywhere in the world, and the Dems will do anything not to change them."


In another tweet, Trump said he was "working on something" but provided no details.

Donald J. Trump  



@realDonaldTrump · [Follow](#)

The Fake News is not mentioning the safety and security of our Country when talking about illegal immigration. Our immigration laws are the weakest and worst anywhere in the world, and the Dems will do anything not to change them & to obstruct-want open borders which means crime!

8:25 AM · Jun 20, 2018 


 **77.9K**  [Reply](#)  [Share](#)




[Read 31.4K replies](#)

Donald J. Trump  

@realDonaldTrump · [Follow](#)

It's the Democrats fault, they won't give us the votes needed to pass good immigration legislation. They want open borders, which breeds horrible crime. Republicans want security. But I am working on something - it never ends!

9:41 AM · Jun 20, 2018 

 **58.2K**  [Reply](#)  [Share](#)

[Read 25.9K replies](#)

The images from the border have deeply shaken both Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill, even as Republicans have broadly agreed with the administration's insistence that Congress hand Trump a legislative fix.

Outside the meeting room, a handful of House Democrats heckled the president as he left the session. The group chanted "Stop separating the children" and "We won't go away" — although Trump appeared to ignore the protests.

“Quit separating the children, Mr. President,” shouted Rep. Juan Vargas (D-Calif.). “Don’t you have kids? Don’t you have kids?”

Trump and top administration officials are unwilling — at the moment, at least — to unilaterally reverse the separation policy.

The issue has roiled Republicans in the Senate, where lawmakers are drafting narrow legislation to address the issue. GOP senators are coalescing around a framework that would allow families to be detained together and would rework the docket of immigration cases so those families are sent to the front of the line of migrants waiting for a court hearing.

“All of the members of the Republican conference support a plan that keeps families together while their immigration status is determined,” said Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) after a GOP meeting earlier in the day.

McConnell said he hoped the Senate could pass such a bill by the end of the week, although that timeline appeared optimistic.

In the House, there are two rival bills. One is a compromise measure that would provide \$25 billion for Trump’s long-sought border wall, offer a pathway to citizenship to young undocumented immigrants and keep migrant families together.

A competing, hard-line bill by House Judiciary Committee Chairman Bob Goodlatte (R-Va.) would not guarantee “dreamers” a path to permanent legal residency and includes controversial enforcement measures such as the mandatory use of a worker verification program.

Adding to the confusion on Capitol Hill, some House Republicans left the evening meeting with the impression that Trump was endorsing the compromise bill.

“The president gave unwavering support of the compromise bill,” said Rep. Jeff Denham (R-Calif.). Several other lawmakers said Trump told Republicans that he was “1,000 percent behind you.”

Yet when Rep. Ted Yoho (R-Fla.) asked Rep. F. James Sensenbrenner Jr. (R-Wis.) in front of reporters whether he knew which bill Trump was promoting at the meeting — the compromise or the hard-line measure — Sensenbrenner said he did not.

Inside the room, Trump acknowledged that the politics on the border issue were not good and were one reason Republicans needed to act on legislation this week, according to Rep. Thomas Massie (R-Ky.).

“There’s a storm brewing off the coast here, and if we don’t handle this in the next four or five days, this could stick all the way through November,” said Rep. Mark Walker (R-N.C.), chairman of the Republican Study Committee. “It’s not a political issue. It’s what’s right and what’s wrong.”

Republicans are eager to find a legislative end to the turmoil sparked by the new “zero tolerance” policy at the border — although Trump in recent days has hinted that only a broader bill that included the border wall and other enforcement measures would pass muster.

The Department of Homeland Security has said 2,342 children have been separated from their parents since last month.

As the numbers have mounted, stories of parents in despair and images of children held in chain-link cages have prompted a stream of Republican lawmakers to break with the president and call for him to unilaterally halt the policy while Congress pursues a solution.

Sen. Orrin G. Hatch (Utah), along with 12 other Senate Republicans, wrote to the Justice Department calling for a pause on separations until Congress can pass a legislative fix.

In the House, Rep. Mark Meadows (R-N.C.), a prominent conservative leader, introduced another stand-alone bill intended to fix the separation policy.

While Republicans scrambled to craft legislation, it was not clear whether Democrats would support the measures. Sen. Jeff Merkley (Ore.) said Tuesday that he and other Democrats would object to any modification of an existing court settlement that limits the detention of migrant children held by federal authorities.

Democrats, Merkley said, “are not going to try to overturn a court decision that was designed to protect kids.”

Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) has presented her own plan that would halt family separations. All 49 members of the Senate Democratic Caucus support it. No Republicans have signed on.

The immigration debate has now become consumed by the consequences of the Trump administration’s border policy.

Top GOP leaders have spoken out against the separations, including the head of the party’s national House campaign organization. Polls released Monday by CNN and Quinnipiac University showed that Americans oppose the policy by roughly 2 to 1.

More legal challenges to the administration’s policy arose Tuesday, as New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo (D) said his state would sue the Trump administration over the family separation practice. The American Civil Liberties Union is already pursuing a nationwide class-action lawsuit in San Diego.

Meanwhile, a second Republican governor, Larry Hogan of Maryland, announced Tuesday that he would not deploy National Guard resources to the border until the Trump administration stops separating migrant children from their parents as part of its criminal prosecution efforts. Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker (R) acted similarly Monday.

Two previous presidents — a Republican and a Democrat — operated under the same laws and court settlements, and both generally refrained from separating families at the border. Some Trump administration officials, including White House Chief of Staff John F. Kelly, have openly cast the separation policy as a deterrent to future illegal immigration.

The two bills set for a House vote this week would both address the status of dreamers, as well as provide funding for the border wall that Trump has long demanded.

Both bills would require the Department of Homeland Security to keep families together, even when a parent is charged with the misdemeanor crime of illegally entering the United States, and would remove a 20-day cap on custody for accompanied children. The bills would also allow DHS to use the \$7 billion appropriated in the measures for border technology to house families.

The two bills differ in several ways, however. One takes a more aggressive approach to immigration enforcement — for instance, requiring employers to screen their workers for legal work status using the federal E-Verify database — and does not guarantee dreamers a path to permanent legal residency. The other, which has been written to garner more Republican votes, omits some of the hard-line measures and offers dreamers a path to permanent residency and eventual citizenship.

Sean Sullivan, Josh Dawsey, Paul Kane, Mark Berman and Erica Werner contributed to this report.