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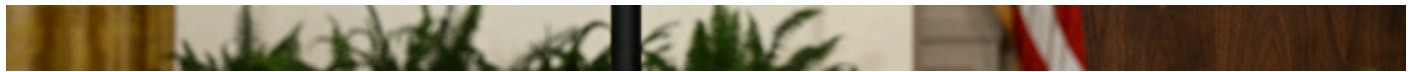
# What Democrats must learn from Biden's disastrous immigration record

Biden knew the border situation meant political disaster. But he struggled for years to address it. Why?

by **Andrew Prokop**

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President Joe Biden speaks at the White House, on June 4, 2024, to announce he will temporarily shut the US-Mexico border to asylum seekers whenever illegal migrant crossings surge. Brendan Smialowski/AFP via Getty Images



*Andrew Prokop is a senior politics correspondent at Vox, covering the White House, elections, and political scandals and investigations. He's worked at Vox since the site's launch in 2014, and before that, he worked as a research assistant at the New Yorker's Washington, DC, bureau.*

One of the main reasons Vice President Kamala Harris lost the election is the Biden administration's record on immigration and the border — polls show it ranks up close with inflation among the top issues that drove swing voters to Trump.

And the recriminations about how Democrats got so out of step with the public on this issue are well underway. Part of the story, as The Atlantic's Rogé Karma and others have written, involves a badly wrong electoral theory that held that support of unauthorized immigrants was key to winning over Latino voters. And part of it is the increased influence of progressive advocacy groups who pushed the party left.

But the true heart of Democrats' political disaster on immigration is a policy failure from top Biden officials.

These officials — including the president — understood perfectly well that a border surge was politically perilous. They sought to drive down arrivals, starting early in Biden's first year in office: All the way back in March 2021, the New York Times reported, Biden was furious about the border crisis, demanding to know whom he needed to fire to fix it.

The problem was that, for three full years, Biden's team proved unable to fix it.

Until, in 2024, they suddenly did.

During Biden's first three years in office, the number of arriving migrants skyrocketed, leading to a backlash as even blue states and cities complained they were overwhelmed. The peak came in December 2023, a month when officials reported about 250,000 encounters with migrants at the border, a record.

Then, starting early in 2024, and continuing throughout the year, border arrivals plummeted. In August, border encounters had dropped to about 58,000 — 77 percent

lower than the previous December's level. By the end of the year, they'd dropped even further.

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Some Democrats touted this as a policy success for Biden — he himself bragged about it at his debate with Trump. But the timeline raises some questions.

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For instance: If it was possible all along to get the border much more under control, why didn't Biden do it years ago? If this was what Biden hoped to achieve all along, what went wrong in the administration's decision-making that it only materialized after years of political pain?

The answers are central to reckoning with Biden's border record, and with how Democrats should handle the issue in the future.

## **What sent border arrival numbers plummeting in 2024?**

Typically, retrospectives like these begin chronologically, at the start of the administration. But in this case, it's more helpful to start near the end — with the question of why border arrivals actually did plummet in 2024.

Progressives have often tended to argue that surges in unauthorized immigration are fundamentally outside the president's control — that, overall, migration trends are driven by broader structural factors, like poor governance and economic conditions in the migrants' home country, and the relative strength of the US economy.

Yet the Latin American countries from which people have been fleeing did not suddenly grow far more stable in 2024, and economic conditions in the US were pretty similar to 2023. So this doesn't satisfactorily explain the dramatic change in the past year.

Rather, there were two important policy changes that occurred that year: one south of the border, and one north of it.

First, the Biden administration got the Mexican government to launch an extensive crackdown.

In the months after December 2023, when Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas traveled to Mexico for talks with government officials, Mexican enforcement officials suddenly started doing far more to stop people from getting to the US border in the first place — apprehending more migrants and sending them to the south of Mexico.

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Border arrests then plummeted in the first few months of 2024.

Second, in June, Biden announced an executive action that, as my colleague Nicole Narea wrote, was “arguably the most restrictive measure Biden has taken yet on the US-Mexico border.” He decreed that new unauthorized migrants would be ineligible for asylum if too many people were coming to the border, which critics said amounted to shutting down the asylum process.

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Both of these brought criticism from progressive advocates for being cruel policies reminiscent of Trump. Skeptics have also questioned whether they will work in the long term if demand to enter the US remains so high. Yet for the time being, at least, they appear to have succeeded in Biden's long-held goal of cutting down on chaos at the border. The problem is that this only happened long after the political damage to Democrats had been done.

## **Moving up the restrictionist ladder, one step at a time**

The Biden administration only ended up arriving at this policy mix after a long and winding road on which they tried many other approaches — approaches that, one after another, failed.

1. **Mixed messages:** When Biden first took office in early 2021, he rolled back harsh Trump policies with great fanfare (while leaving others in place). But his team also tried to stress that the border was “not open.” This was obviously a mixed message — the first of many.

2. **Root causes:** Unauthorized border arrivals soon surged. The Biden team initially claimed their goal was to “manage the flow” of arrivals rather than reduce them, and that they planned to address the “root causes” of migration by helping improve governance in Latin American countries, with Biden assigning part of this task to Harris. (Harris accomplished little, but the assignment came back to haunt her last year when Republicans claimed she was Biden’s “border czar.”)
3. **Rise of the centrists:** Later in 2021, Biden’s initial round of immigration hires, many of whom had close ties to progressive advocacy groups, were sidelined, and more centrist aides from the political or national security worlds were put in charge of border policy. But while these aides wanted to reduce border crossings, they seemed at a loss on how to actually do this.
4. **Legal pathways:** Pressure intensified in 2022, with Democratic politicians in blue states or cities criticizing the administration. So Biden rolled out a two-sided policy in early 2023 — limiting asylum eligibility for people from certain countries who didn’t follow an orderly process, while using executive authority to “parole” hundreds of thousands more people in legally if they followed that process. His hope was to change illegal immigration into legal immigration. He ended up just getting more of both.
5. **Bipartisan talks:** In late 2023, Biden argued that what he needed to fix the problem was a new law reforming the asylum process and providing more money for the system, and he sought a bipartisan deal that would link this with a stalled Ukraine aid package. So he embraced a bill far to the right of previous Democratic immigration proposals. But this didn’t work either; Trump got the GOP to nix the deal.
6. **Plain restrictionism:** So, with the presidential election coming closer and border arrivals still soaring, Biden’s team finally acted on their own in more straightforwardly restrictionist ways. They reached their arrangement with Mexico to prevent more people from getting to the border, and they rolled out their toughest asylum restrictions yet by executive order.

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All this time, Biden's own instincts counseled political peril, and he frequently berated his staff for failing to solve the border problem. But he was also cautious about policies that could be tagged as too Trumpian. This caution was in part due to fear of alienating progressives. Biden's 2021 border policies — which were far less restrictionist than those he eventually embraced — were already enough to spur progressive backlash.

Meanwhile, the administration was riven by internal tensions, which constantly spilled out in the press. One aide close to the progressive advocacy world stepped down in late 2021 and went public with her critiques in a New Yorker article headlined “The disillusionment of a young Biden official.” When Domestic Policy Council chair Susan Rice pushed tougher policies, more left-leaning appointees complained to sympathetic reporters that she was cruel and heartless.

So each climb up one more rung of this restrictionist ladder was only taken after prolonged contemplation and with great reluctance. Each time, the political pain the administration was feeling from the right and the center-left — including blue state Democrats dealing with migrant surges — became intense enough to spur them to disregard a bit more of the left's concerns.

Still, the administration kept hoping there was some sweet spot that would solve the border problem while also delivering pro-immigration groups a win — and they never

found it.

## The belated Mexico deal

But crackdowns at home weren't the only reason border arrivals plummeted in 2024 — indeed, there's a good case they weren't even the main reason. That main reason, many analysts believe, was the aforementioned stepped-up enforcement from Mexico that Biden officials had secured in a late 2023 understanding. That is: it was diplomacy that did the trick.

Which makes sense — if the policy goal is to reduce border arrivals, preventing people from getting to the border is an obvious way to do that. But progressive advocates had long condemned this reasoning as immoral and cruel to migrants who were leaving awful conditions in their countries of origin to seek a better life in the US. This would only be a band-aid on the problem, they claimed; only solving the root causes of emigration would fix the problem.

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The problem is that the root causes are extremely hard to solve — making troubled countries more politically stable, economically prosperous, and safe is easier said than



done. The main countries at issue didn't even stay the same — an initial focus on El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras was soon swamped by increased migration from Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Haiti. There was, arguably, simply no way to solve any of those countries' issues anytime soon.

That left the option of Mexico, through which all those migrants heading to the US's southern border pass. Trump's greatest successes at reducing border numbers had seemed to come through getting the Mexican government to do the enforcement for him. To achieve that, Trump had come to an understanding with Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) that, so long as border arrivals dropped, he wouldn't interfere in Mexico's domestic affairs — a status quo AMLO seemed to like.

Yet Biden's team came into power with other priorities for the relationship as well — such as criticizing AMLO or his allies for offenses against Mexico's democratic system and journalists, as well as defending the interests of US energy companies. Relations started off hostile and remained rocky for some time. Eventually, the administration concluded — correctly — that there was much more the Mexican government could be doing to deter arrivals and wasn't, which led to the December 2023 talks that preceded Mexico's enforcement crackdown.

But why not earlier? The exact reasons this took so long to produce — how much was due to a reluctance to follow in Trump's footsteps, a lack of prioritization, poor negotiation, AMLO's truculence, or other matters — remain unclear. But it certainly seems with hindsight that, if Biden's administration understood the full extent of the political danger of the border issue, they would have prioritized it more and earlier in their relations with Mexico.

## **“The simple truth”**

Now, with Trump set to take office and impose his mass deportation agenda, Democrats are running scared on immigration. Dozens of House Democrats voted to support the Laken Riley Act, a sweeping bill mandating detention of unauthorized immigrants accused of certain crimes. It is currently before the Senate, and several Democrats seem inclined to support it there too.

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Rather than simply moving reflexively right, the party should thoughtfully recalibrate, to determine what approach can best let them stand up for moral and ethical policies while being politically sustainable.

Indeed, prominent figures in the immigration advocacy world are now arguing that Democrats went too far left, and need to rebrand themselves as the party that can establish order at the border — that only then will they have the credibility to keep defending unauthorized immigrant families here now.

Biden came to a similar realization eventually. “We must face the simple truth,” Biden said in remarks at the White House this past June, when announcing his new asylum restrictions. “To protect America as a land that welcomes immigrants, you must first secure the border and secure it now.”

That was a view Democrats generally shared at the start of Barack Obama's presidency. Obama initially prioritized border enforcement, believing only that could win public — and Republican — support for a deal legalizing the status of unauthorized immigrants here now. But the deal never materialized, and Democrats responded by moving to the left. They increasingly prioritized helping unauthorized immigrants, rather than

cracking down on them, a cause that seemed to gain more steam when Trump was in power.

But by the time Biden took office, the party had turned away from the “border security first” approach. Instead, border security was just one of many immigration-related priorities. Though Biden’s team genuinely hoped to send arrival numbers down, for three years they were either unable to figure out what it took, or unwilling to do what it took, to make that happen.

Though Biden’s team feared public backlash, they implicitly hoped that the public had evolved — that the backlash against Trump meant the country could accept far higher levels of unauthorized immigration. That many Americans really now believed that in this house, no human is illegal.

They have since been disabused of that notion.

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