

Rhetoric, Policy, and Reality

U.S. Border Security and Migration Reform

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In recent years, comprehensive immigration reform has been a central issue in U.S. public debate. Different estimates put the number of unauthorized immigrants at 11 million. Special attention has been given to the need to approve a broad reform to improve a clearly dysfunctional immigration system. For political reasons, this discussion has centered on border security, and today it is front and center in the U.S. campaigns running up to the 2016 presidential elections.

The debate about the need for a comprehensive immigration reform in the United States is not new, nor has it been put forward exclusively by the Democratic Party or the Obama

administration. Actually, the recognition of the broad problem and the design of alternative proposals have involved members of the country's two main political parties. One example was the Secure America and Orderly Immigration Act, a bill introduced May 12, 2005, by Senators John McCain (R-Arizona) and Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.), which even then included the possibility of amnesty or legalizing the status of part of the immigrant population.

Despite general recognition of the need to resolve the big limitations in the current U.S. immigration system, the debate has become partisan and considerably polarized and tainted with a discourse based on imprecise information that has curtailed consensus and the design of an effective solution.

Recently, but mainly since the 9/11 attacks, the debate on immigration reform has been directly linked to the issue

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of border security, using the argument that “illegal” immigration contributes to crime and violence and represents an important national security risk. Some have even talked about a possible link between undocumented immigration, organized crime, and terrorist groups like Al Qaeda or even the Islamic State. Thus, in recent years, the main proposals for immigration reform have made border security their priority. Just consider, for example, bills like the Security through Regularized Immigration and a Vibrant Economy Act of 2007 or the Comprehensive Immigration Reform for America's Security and Prosperity Act of 2009, and, more recently, the Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act, which was approved in the Senate on June 27, 2013, but did not get through the House.

In recent years and parallel to the election of the first African-American to the presidency in U.S. history, public opinion has become significantly polarized and racist and anti-immigrant stances have been expressed more openly. In this context, little by little, the issue of border security has displaced that of comprehensive immigration reform, which is why President Obama's proposal has not fared well. The conservative wing of Congress, represented mainly by the Republican Party, has been quite effective in stopping any advance in this area. Amnesty has been the point most objected to, mainly by those linked to the Tea Party. Possibly in an attempt to reconcile opposing positions, the president and those favoring the reform have accepted the reinforcement of border security and supported mass deportations. It should be pointed out here that the Obama administration has deported the highest number of people in the country's history.

The attempts to reconcile the different positions and come to a consensus have not rendered the expected results. Groups opposing immigration reform and undocumented immigration have been much more effective.

In addition, government spending on protecting the border has increased exponentially. In the last eight years, border security spending has been in excess of US\$100 billion, and since 2004, the number of Border Patrol agents has more than doubled.

Congress has massively expanded its infrastructure and technology expenditures for border protection, including the construction of a fence that divides the two neighboring nations. Also, the executive actions to defer deportations that President Obama took given Congress's inactivity on the issue have recently stopped moving ahead. These actions may have been temporary, but they would have maintained the legal status of approximately four million unauthorized migrants in the country. The federal judge for the Southern District of Texas, Andrew Hanen, ordered these measures postponed while their constitutionality was being evaluated, granting the motion brought by a coalition of 26 states.¹

These victories have been based on quite aggressive rhetoric underlining the costs of unauthorized immigration and the supposed insecurity of the border with Mexico. Different political actors, above all in Texas, like Republican presidential hopeful Senator Ted Cruz and the state's governor and vice-governor, Greg Abbott and Dan Patrick, respectively, have forcefully expressed their positions against comprehensive immigration reform and in favor of more border security spending.

It should be pointed out that the arguments of many of these people and agencies, like the Texas Department of Public Safety (TxDPS), do not seem to be based on the actual situation in the region as reflected in official crime statistics.² The real figures show that the U.S. side of the U.S.-Mexico border is quite safe. On the other hand, no appropriate measurements exist to effectively assess the results of the enormous border security spending of recent years.³ It would truly be a tragedy if after the enormous amount of resources spent the border continued to be as dangerous as some politicians or members of local security agencies claim.

Looking at the hard data and the experience of border inhabitants —again, on the U.S. side—, we seem to be observing a political strategy to artificially stimulate border state economies through increases in aggregate demand. It is important to underline that the growth derived from greater government security spending is only short-term, since we are not talking here about productive investment. At the same time, the law of diminishing returns would explain the few potential advantages of increasing border security spending even more as proposed by Texas authorities.

Taking into account the most recent debates about immigration reform and border security, as well as the special emphasis on these issues in last year's mid-term elections, it is to be expected that the border will again occupy a central

place in the 2016 presidential campaign. However, in such an important, complex process, it is vital that the electorate has information about the border's real situation. According to the National Research Council, undocumented immigration seems to represent more benefits than costs to the United States, and the argument that the border is unsafe seems to be fallacious, as already mentioned. Perhaps U.S. Americans would prefer their taxes to be spent more efficiently in areas like education and productive infrastructure. Otherwise, those who really benefit are private security contractors, who displace productive investment and could limit sustainable growth in the long run. ■■■

FURTHER READING

- Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera and Terence Garrett, "The Phenomenology of Perception and Fear: Security and the Reality of the U.S.-Mexico Border," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* vol. 29, no. 2, 2014, pp. 243-255.
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NOTES

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