

The Morning on Immigration

David Leonhardt *The New York Times* January 10, 2024

A Trump effect

Since Donald Trump first ran for president in 2016, the Democratic Party has changed its own approach to immigration. Not long ago, leading Democrats supported immigration enforcement measures like tough border security and deportations. Today, much of the party is uncomfortable doing so.

These changes help explain why the issue [has become so vexing](#) for President Biden and congressional Democrats. Illegal immigration has surged during Biden's presidency, partly because of the party's new approach: Many migrants have come to believe, reasonably, that they will be able to remain in the U.S. so long as they can reach the border. Many voters are unhappy about the situation, and polls suggest that it is a problem for Biden.

“Believe it or not, there is something that might hurt President Biden's re-election chances more than inflation,” Greg Ip of The Wall Street Journal [recently wrote](#).

With Congress having returned from its holiday recess, a bipartisan group of senators is negotiating over a bill that would tighten border security (as well as provide aid to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan). To help you understand the debate, today's newsletter will trace the Democratic Party's changing position. In a follow-up newsletter, I'll look at public opinion on immigration.

Bernie vs. Wall Street

Before Trump's presidency, Democrats tended to combine passionate support for the rights of immigrants already in this country with strong support for border security.

Bernie Sanders was an example. He favored pathways to citizenship for undocumented immigrants and opposed long detentions for immigrants arrested

at the border. At the same time, Sanders worried about the effects of immigration on workers' wages.

“There is a reason why Wall Street and all of corporate America likes immigration reform, and it is not, in my view, that they’re staying up nights worrying about undocumented workers,” Sanders said in 2015. “What I think they are interested in is seeing a process by which we can bring low-wage labor of all levels into this country to depress wages for Americans, and I strongly disagree with that.”

Barack Obama also embodied this nuanced combination. In his acceptance speech at the 2008 Democratic National Convention, Obama said, “Passions may fly on immigration, but I don’t know anyone who benefits when a mother is separated from her infant child or an employer undercuts American wages by hiring illegal workers.”

It’s hard to imagine a leading Democrat making a similar statement today. Trump’s harsh anti-immigration stance — including lies, racist scapegoating and family separations — sent many Democrats scurrying in the other direction. Much of the party left behind its old approach.

By 2020, top Democrats were instead calling for the decriminalization of the border. On Capitol Hill, Democrats spoke more positively about immigration than any party had in the country’s history, according to [an analysis of congressional speeches](#). During Biden’s campaign, he encouraged immigrants to come and later appointed advocates of looser immigration policies to his administration, as Dexter Filkins of The New Yorker [has noted](#). Today, liberals describe border-security measures that the Democratic Party once would have favored as severe, cruel or “Trump-era.”

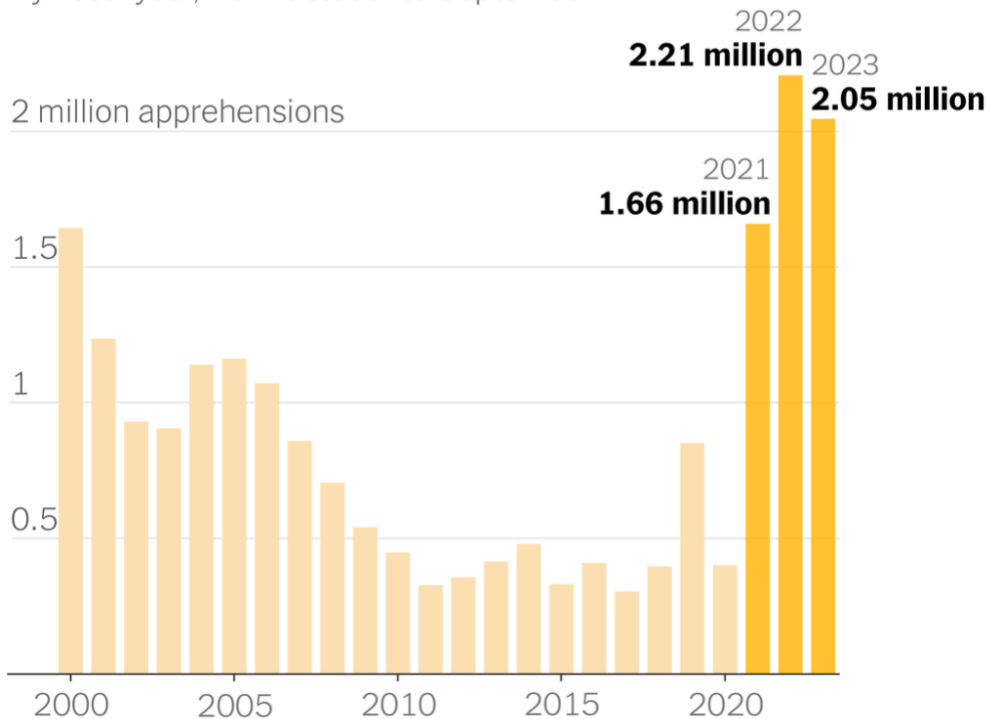
Real-world effects

This new stance is rooted in a serious political argument: namely, a humanitarian case for allowing poor people to improve their lives by moving to the U.S. To put it another way, many Democratic politicians favor higher levels of immigration than federal law allows.

The shift has had real-world consequences. People in other countries have sensed that the U.S. has become more welcoming, even to migrants without permission to enter. Within weeks of Biden taking office, migration surged.

Annual southwestern border apprehensions

By fiscal year, from October to September



Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection | By The New York Times

The surge has clearly had downsides. Dangerous child labor, by migrant children who arrive at the border alone and are often admitted, has increased in the U.S. ([This Times map](#) shows where they are living.) Some border communities are overwhelmed. Social services in major cities are strained.

Many Democrats, to be clear, are unhappy about these developments. The governors of Arizona, Colorado, Illinois and New York have all complained. Mayor Oscar Leeser of El Paso, Texas, said this fall that his city had reached “a breaking point.” Henry Cuellar, a House Democrat who represents a Texas border district, has said that Trump went too far in one direction and Biden has gone too far in the other. Senator John Fetterman of Pennsylvania has [criticized progressives](#) for ignoring border security.

Biden himself seems torn. His administration announced a border crackdown last year and, not surprisingly, migration briefly fell. But the crackdown was modest, and the surge soon resumed.

Now, congressional Republicans are insisting on tougher policies [as their price](#) for passing more aid to Ukraine. The policies could include more rigorous asylum screenings — to determine which migrants have a credible fear of political repression — and faster deportation for people who don't qualify for legal entry.

Talks between the two parties have made progress, and a deal might happen soon. But obstacles remain. Progressive Democrats genuinely oppose many border-security measures. And some Republicans wonder if they would be better off if the deal collapsed and their party could instead run in 2024 against Democrats' immigration record.