Insight

Comparing Trump and Biden on Immigration

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Executive Summary

- President Trump and Democratic presidential candidate and former Vice President Joe Biden differ dramatically in their approaches to immigration policy.
- President Trump has focused mainly on creating a merit-based, or high-skill, immigration system and looks to continue the immigration agenda that has been a mainstay in his administration.
- Former Vice President Joe Biden would likely return to the immigration system of the Obama Administration and would relax the strict regulation so government resources and eventually citizenship would be available to all classes of immigrants.

Introduction

In the 2020 presidential campaign, immigration policy is a point of differentiation between presidential incumbent Donald Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden. The candidates' views of immigration differ largely because of the assumptions being made about the contributions that immigrants make to the economy. While President Trump's policies reflect a view that immigrants harm native-born workers, Joe Biden's proposals assume that immigrants make economic contributions. These basic assumptions lead to drastically different policies. In his almost four years in office, President Trump has cracked down on undocumented immigrants and reshaped the immigration system, while claiming that his measures support the workers and the U.S. economy as a whole. Biden's plan for immigration consists of two major points: dismantle the policies of the Trump Administration and reenact the Obama-era policies, which would include giving the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship. This analysis summarizes the immigration policies during the Trump Administration's first term, outlines

his second-term goals, and identifies the areas that a Biden Administration could target and reverse regarding an immigration agenda.

The Principles of Each Candidate

Trump's Immigration Agenda

During his first term in office, President Trump created several policies that stem the flow of immigrants into the United States. Where the Trump Administration focuses on deregulation in most areas, immigration is one area that has seen major new regulation, including over 400 executive orders, in the past four years. The president's justification for regulation and restriction assumes immigrant workers will increase labor market competition and drive down wages of native-born workers. He also contends that low-skilled immigration is responsible for African American and Hispanic unemployment.

Going forward, the Trump Administration plans to end chain migration and the visa lottery system, and instead turn to a merit-based immigration system. Chain migration is when an immigrant in the United States sponsors another family member for admission who can then sponsor other immigrants themselves, and so on, and the visa lottery system randomly selects those who are allowed to immigrate to the United States from a large pool of candidates. The merit-based system favors high-skill immigrants and seeks to eliminate family-based policies.

Biden's Likely Immigration Agenda

Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden's immigration agenda is far less restrictive than that of the Trump Administration. It mainly involves reviving Obama-era policies while undoing current Trump Administration policies Where Biden pushes regulation in most areas, immigration is not one of them. Biden has proposed relaxing strict immigration policies and instead turning to a model where every type of immigrant, documented or undocumented, could gain access to government resources and a path to citizenship. The driving principles behind many of the Obama-era immigration policies (and now the Biden campaign's policies) are foremost equality and opportunity, but also, economic growth and prosperity.

Surveying the Research

Previous American Action Forum (AAF) research and other academic literature has found that President Trump's reasoning for limiting immigration is largely misguided. One study finds that immigration leads to labor specialization, which increases total factor productivity. Furthermore, the increase in productivity leads to increased income for

American workers. Other studies have confirmed the income benefits. One found that native-born U.S. workers experienced long-run and short-run increase in wages during the high levels of immigration between 1990 and 2004. While it is true that new immigrants do bring labor-force competition, those who are directly impacted by increased immigration are other immigrants. On net, immigration leads to a more dynamic labor market and bolsters economic growth.

If the United States were to implement President Trump's proposed idea of removing all undocumented immigrants from the labor force, AAF research has found that gross domestic product (GDP) would decrease by between $380 billion and $620 billion and create a shortage of at least 4 million workers.

To be sure, merit-based immigration does bring economic benefits, too. For example, a study examined the growth of computer science workers on temporary H-1B visas from 1994 and 2001. It found that high-skilled immigration led to the creation of more IT firms in the United States, lowered the price of IT goods, and boosted the wages among non-computer science workers. While there certainly are benefits to high-skilled immigration, it is important not to discount the effects low-skill immigrant workers have on the U.S. economy. Many of the benefits of low-skilled immigration go to employers at least in the immediate term, but have also been shown to benefit consumers. While some estimates have indicated a negative impact of lower-skilled immigrants on native-born workers, these impacts appear to be modest and in the long run are increasingly muted.

Biden's immigration proposals could have positive economic effects if they were to be implemented. AAF research finds that adding foreign workers to the economy does not crowd out employment for native workers. The number of jobs in the United States is not fixed, and as the population and labor force increase, so does total employment. Furthermore, immigrants generate growth and employment opportunities by increasing the total number of people in the United States, leading to increased consumption levels, higher demand, and more production.

Assessing Specific Policies

Outlined below are President Trump's stances on several immigration issues going into the 2020 election that may be targets for reversal in the event of a Biden Administration.

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)

President Trump announced in 2017 that he would be ending The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. There are about 644,000 young adults under the DACA program in the United States currently. In 2018, AAF research estimated "Dreamers"

contribute $42 billion annually to U.S. GDP, equating to $10.8 billion in tax revenues for the federal government per year. That is compared to $7.4 billion of federal costs per year for Dreamers, which means there is a net positive fiscal impact of $3.4 billion a year (see the AAF video and infographic on this issue) when DACA recipients work in the United States. In ending the DACA program, the Trump Administration is forgoing positive economic contributions, while a Biden Administration would be fostering these contributions.

Since DACA was a major focus of Obama-era immigration policy, Biden would reverse President Trump's efforts to end the DACA program. He would also strengthen the protections for Dreamers and so that they have a path to citizenship. In addition, Biden would make Dreamers eligible for federal student aid, such as loans and Pell grants, as part of his higher-education plan. He also proposed protections for the parents of Dreamers but offers very little detail on what these protections would entail.

Border Security

A main pillar of the Trump campaign in 2016 was to build the border wall between the United States and Mexico to stem the flow of immigrants entering the country. In 2019, about 980,000 people illegally crossed the southern border, the majority being families with children. This is the highest number of border crossings since 2007. The wall would cost around $5.7 billion. President Trump tried to have Mexico pay for the wall indirectly through the United States-Mexico-Canada Trada Agreement (USMCA). An AAF insight found that the USMCA will not generate any substantial economic growth that could increase tax receipts. Thus, it would not be able to fund a wall. After this means for funding the wall failed, President Trump declared a national emergency in February 2019. By doing this, the president invoked his authority to call up and deploy members of the military's Ready Reserves, seize private lands, and repurpose military construction (MilCon) funding. By repurposing these MilCon funds, President Trump has taken more than half of the budget for other MilCon projects and has faced much backlash from Congress. The Trump Administration announced it has so far received funding for 61 percent of the wall and has finished 235 miles out of the 450 that were promised by the end of the year.

Like President Trump, Biden does not support decriminalizing illegal border crossing, but promises to reduce the number of prosecutions at the border for minor immigration violations.

Biden condemns the southern border wall and supports ending the national emergency that secures funding for the wall from the military as part of his first 100 days in office. Instead, he has proposed investing in technology for better security at the border. He would implement better screening infrastructure such as cameras, sensors, large-scale X-ray

machines, and fixed watch towers at points of entry.

Central and South American Migration

Many illegal border crossers are refugees and asylum seekers from the Northern Triangle, a troubled region comprised of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. In January 2019, the Department of Homeland Security announced the implementation of the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP). The policy and its guidance outline the procedures under which the U.S. government will return certain asylum seekers to Mexico to wait for the duration of their cases pending in the U.S. immigration court system. Since the beginning of his term, President Trump has continuously tried revoking the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for the countries of the Northern Triangle. In fact, as of May 2019, TPS designations for El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Nepal, Nicaragua, and Sudan have been terminated pending ongoing court rulings. In September 2019, President Trump cut the refugee cap from 30,000 in 2019 to 18,000 in 2020, while also setting a new (and more selective) criteria for those who may be allowed to enter the United States. By August 2020, only 6,674 refugees have been admitted into the United States versus a total of 85,000 in 2016, the last year of Obama's term. The actions taken by the Trump Administration to stem the flow of refugees and asylum seekers will have two consequences: force people to stay in the dangerous conditions of their home countries, and/or push the humanitarian crisis into Mexico.

In order to steady rather than halt the flow of South and Central American immigrants into the United States, Biden's plans would seek to address the factors that cause the need for migration. He has proposed a four-year, $4 billion regional strategy to address the factors driving migration from the Northern Triangle. Aid would be dependent on factors such as gang and gender-based violence, improvements in education, and the implementation of anti-corruption measures. It is unlikely that $4 billion over 4 years is enough to address all the aforementioned issues effectively, if at all. Due to the broad nature of this investment, the best-case scenario is likely negligible improvements in the region. This plan could necessitate significantly more government spending and could even worsen the situation by causing dependency on U.S. funds. Furthermore, Biden has proposed mobilizing private investment in the region, improving security and rule of law, addressing endemic corruption, and prioritizing poverty reduction and economic development. As a part of the plan, Biden would immediately end President Trump's Migrant Protection Protocols program and undo regulations that make it harder for Central American asylum seekers to enter the United States. Biden has proposed to keep TPS programs for the countries which the Trump Administration have terminated, especially the Northern Triangle countries. He would also extend TPS to Venezuelans. As for TPS holders in the United States, Biden has pledged a path to citizenship via legislative immigration reform to those who have built lives

in the United States. Lastly, Biden will also open the United States to 125,000 refugees from around the globe, up sevenfold from the 18,000 of the Trump Administration's cap.

COVID-19 and Immigration

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. employers were hiring over 450,000 new immigrant workers a year that worked in a range of different occupations. By June 2020, the White House had issued a proclamation that suspended several immigration programs it claimed present risk to the U.S. labor market during the economic recovery. In the near term, this reduction in immigration will likely harm employers that disproportionately rely on foreign-born workers, specifically in the agricultural, construction, and transportation sectors.

In the long term, halting new immigration to the United States could have negative impacts on productivity, output, and economic growth. Prior AAF analysis has also shown that this move could negatively affect job creation. In the midst of a pandemic, however, a more restricted immigration system, as is being proposed by President Trump, could be beneficial in the short term for economic recovery and reducing the spread of the virus. It is important to note that, should more restrictive measures be taken, it would likely be difficult to undo them as the public health situation stabilizes.

While Biden does not need to directly deal with the effect of COVID-19 on the labor market right now, the situation remains unstable, especially with flu season on the horizon. The United States will still be in recovery come January, even if the public health situation improves. Joe Biden does not seem to have a detailed recovery plan. While it appears as though the Biden campaign does understand immigration as a means toward economic growth and job creation, its plans are sparse when it comes to immigration during the pandemic. Even given the benefits of immigration, an economically unstable time when recovery is needed may not be the ideal moment to welcome 125,000 refugees or grant citizenship to 11 million undocumented individuals. The copy-and-paste nature of Biden's immigration policy does not seem to acknowledge the current public health crisis.

Conclusion

The immigration topics and the respective policy stances of both presidential nominees outlined above hardly scratch the surface of issues that immigrants and U.S. citizens face daily. President Trump has increased regulations, allegedly prioritizing American workers and wages, and is moving toward a merit-based system. Due to pandemic-related immigration policies, the Trump Administration has made it virtually impossible for migrants and refugees to enter the United States, citing health, safety, and labor-market concerns. On the other hand, Biden's approach, which is mostly a rehashing of Obama-era

policies, does not seem to acknowledge the difficulty of drastic changes and foreign investment during the pandemic. In the medium- to long-term, however, some aspects of the Biden immigration plan could be an opportunity to expand the U.S. labor force, increase productivity, and ultimately lead to economic growth. There must also be considerations for the public health crisis the country currently faces and how a less restrictive immigration system could affect the number of COVID-19 cases.