



The Daily Dish

Immigration Follies

DOUGLAS HOLTZ-EAKIN | JUNE 5, 2024

Immigration policy is crucial for the future of the U.S. economy and the culture more broadly. Unfortunately, the presidential race features immigration policies that are some combination of incoherent, infeasible, and counterproductive.

Begin with yesterday's [executive order](#) by President Biden. At its heart is to "bar migrants who cross our Southern border unlawfully from receiving asylum." It adds the caveat that the provisions of the executive order "will be in effect when high levels of encounters at the Southern Border exceed our ability to deliver timely consequences." Specifically, when the seven-day average for daily crossings hits 2,500, illegal migrants would not be eligible for asylum. As it turns out, the average is already over the limit, so the order could go into effect right away and border officers would return migrants across the border to Mexico or to their home countries.

The order is a moral quagmire. Asylum is, by definition, the protection granted to someone who has left their native country as a refugee. It has everything to do with the circumstances of the individual and nothing to do with how many other people crossed the border the previous week. The individual could merit protection one week and not the next. It makes no sense.

It is legally questionable as well. The American Civil Liberties Union has already announced it will challenge the order in court, just as it successfully challenged a similar, but stronger, executive order by then-President Trump.

Finally, it is unlikely to solve the president's political need for a more forceful border policy. But in politics, Trump-lite never works (see: DeSantis, Ron).

Meanwhile, over on the dystopian side of this fantasyland, Donald Trump is once again promising mass deportations as his immigration policy. The last time he engaged in this fiction, in 2015, he promised to deport 11.2 million illegal migrants. At that time, AAF [estimated](#) that this would cost roughly \$400 billion to \$600 billion to have every migrant apprehended, detained, legally processed, and transported to their home country. Also, the labor force would shrink and reduce real GDP by \$1.6 trillion. All of the numbers would be much bigger now.

Trump didn't do it then and he wouldn't do it now. It is just campaign theater.

The reality is that no politician should condone illegal border crossings. But no politician should ignore the importance of immigrants more broadly. In the past year, they have been the source of employment growth (see graph, below). Looking forward, immigration will be the dominant source of labor force growth and central to U.S. economic vitality. The changes needed will reform the visa-granting system to take best advantage of immigration while simultaneously relieving pressure on the border.

Native-Born (left axis) and Foreign-Born (right axis) Employment

