

# [***Joe Biden promised to 'absorb' 2 million asylum seekers 'in a heartbeat' in 2019 - he now faces an immigration crisis***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BGX-2MV1-DY7V-G2DR-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; During his 2020 presidential campaign, Joe Biden promised a stark departure from the immigration policies of the Trump administration.

He pledged a 100-day moratorium [*on deportations*](https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/se/date/2020-03-15/segment/03) after taking office. He promised to protect [*sanctuary cities*](https://www.cnn.com/2019/05/10/politics/kfile-biden-drugs-fence-2006/index.html) from federal law enforcement agencies. And he harshly criticized the Trump administration's treatment of undocumented immigrants at the southern border, asserting that America had the capacity to "absorb people" while calling on asylum seekers to "surge" to the border

"We could afford to take in a heartbeat another two million," Biden [*said*](https://www.temi.com/editor/t/5atmf_-DZs6KKPW4nCClWwraC-JsHhxhxAHEzhQPP8-2fJBDyLB_NUmJxxL5mwQFH1Un6-T1RN-OxfzuxsgAS7wvfio?loadFrom=Dashboard&openShareModel=False) at one event in August 2019. "The idea that a country of 330 million people cannot absorb people who are in desperate need and who are justifiably fleeing oppression is absolutely bizarre."

An estimated 3 million migrants who have been encountered at the southern border since Biden took office in January 2021 remain in the US, according to figures flagged by the Biden administration.

But the mass influx of asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border has significantly strained US immigration resources. And turned into a significant political problem for President Biden-one that former President Donald Trump is seeking to capitalize on. In a recent CNN poll, Biden's handling of immigration garnered his lowest approval rating, with [*only 30%*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/02/politics/cnn-poll-economy/index.html) of Americans expressing approval of how he was dealing with the border.

That's led Biden to dramatically change the way he talks about the situation at the border, shifting away from the more liberal immigration positions he espoused as a presidential contender and returning to more centrist views he held as a senator and vice president.

Most recently, the White House shifted its rhetoric on [*sanctuary cities,*](https://www.foxnews.com/politics/white-house-calls-for-sanctuary-cities-to-cooperate-with-ice-amid-furor-over-illegal-immigrant-crimes) urging the cities to comply with law enforcement agencies regarding migrants who've committed a crime. And Biden has embraced a now-stalled border bill that would have significantly tightened asylum laws and included a host of other conservative agenda items.

"For too long, we all know the border's been broken," Biden [*said in January in support of the bill.*](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/01/26/statement-from-president-joe-biden-on-the-bipartisan-senate-border-security-negotiations/) "It's long past time to fix it."

In many respects, Biden's shift aligns closely with a more longstanding position on immigration throughout his political tenure. Over decades as a US senator and in his prior presidential bids, Biden maintained more centrist positions. It was primarily in reaction to the policies of the Trump administration that Biden began adopting notably progressive stances on immigration during the 2020 presidential campaign.

In a statement to CNN, a White House spokesperson reiterated the administration's call for congressional Republicans to support the bipartisan border bill.

"Absent Congressional action and as we experience historic global migration, this Administration has led the largest expansion of lawful pathways in decades, worked with partners across the region to address irregular migration, and enforced our laws."

In a sign of how important immigration is as an issue in the 2024 election, both Biden and Trump held campaign appearances at the southern border last week, with Trump traveling to Eagle Pass and Biden about 300 miles away in Brownsville, Texas.

Biden directly called on Trump to support the border bill and encourage Republicans to take it up on the floors of Congress.

"So, here's what I would say to Mr. Trump: Instead of playing ***politics*** with the issue, instead of telling members of Congress to block this legislation, join me. Or I'll join you - in telling the congress to pass this bipartisan border security bill. We can do it together. You know and I know it's the toughest, most efficient, most effective border security bill this country's ever seen," said Biden. "So instead of playing ***politics*** with the issue, why don't we just get together and get it done."

President Biden is also widely expected to touch on immigration and the crisis at the border during his State of the Union address to Congress this evening.

Biden's rhetorical shift on immigration reflects a broader pivot among Democrats. Last week, Rep. Tom Suozzi was sworn in after winning a special election to replace ousted Republican Rep. George Santos in New York.

Suozzi won in part by running on a platform that included [*cracking down*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/02/14/suozzi-immigration-new-york-special-election/) at the border despite having [*boasted*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJEG5ihZ8HQ) in 2022 about "kicking ICE out of Nassau County" as a county executive. But in his special election in 2024, he ran ads [*touting his support*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Olr7e0l0gKU) for Border Patrol and securing the border.

At a Democratic debate in September 2019, Biden [*said*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KL4OHOAVtPE&t=97s) as president he would do "several more things."

"I would in fact make sure that there is - we immediately surge to the border all those people are seeking asylum. They deserve to be heard. That's who we are," Biden said.

"We're a nation that says, 'If you wanna flee and you're fleeing oppression, you should come,'" he [*added*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KL4OHOAVtPE&t=97s).

During his 2020 presidential campaign against Donald Trump, Biden was in a much different position as illegal border crossings [*were significantly lower t*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/immigration/2024/02/11/trump-biden-immigration-border-compared/)han they are today.

Much of Biden's rhetoric at the time came in response to then-President Trump's harsh rhetoric and policies related to the border. A year before he launched his campaign, in 2018, the Trump administration [*unveiled*](https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/07/politics/trump-family-separation/index.html) a "zero tolerance" policy on illegal immigration.

Under Trump, the Justice Department announced it would pursue criminal charges against every adult crossing the border unlawfully. This led to the separation of numerous families, including those with infants as young as a few months old, as children couldn't be detained alongside their parents in federal prisons.

The policies faced widespread outcry and backlash and played significantly in that year's Democratic primary. And Biden was contending with his own record on immigration - both as vice president and a senator - where he once supported significantly harsher policies and the country saw record deportations. Those policies [*drew flack*](https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/01/politics/obama-immigration-record-biden-debate/index.html) from those running to his left in the party's primary.

"No great country can say it's secure without being able to secure its borders," Biden [*said*](https://www.c-span.org/video/?200659-1/biden-campaign-event) during a campaign stop while running for president in 2007.

In the [*run-up to and during*](https://www.cnn.com/2019/05/10/politics/kfile-biden-drugs-fence-2006/index.html) that campaign in 2008, Biden spoke about jailing employers who hire "illegals," said sanctuary cities shouldn't be allowed to violate federal law and argued a fence was needed to stop "tons" of drugs coming into the country from "corrupt Mexico."

Vowed to reverse Trump's policies and welcome asylum seekers

While Biden didn't go as far as some of his opponents in that Democratic primary, in speeches and debates he vowed to reverse Trump's asylum policies.

"'The fact is that, look, we should not be locking people up," Biden [*said*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/06/28/transcript-night-first-democratic-debate/) at a June 2019 Democratic primary debate. "We should be making sure we change the circumstance - as we did - why they would leave in the first place. And those who come seeking asylum, we should immediately have the capacity to absorb them, keep them safe until they can be heard."

"Our Statue of Liberty, not very far from here says, invites us to welcome the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to be free," he [*said*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Tyl7iC3w3c&t=864s) in a speech in July 2019. "I'll reverse Trump's detrimental asylum policies."

Upon taking office, [*Biden issued executive orders*](https://www.texastribune.org/2021/01/20/joe-biden-trump-immigration/) ending construction on the border wall; reversed the so-called Muslim ban, which prohibited travel from several majority-Muslim countries; directed law enforcement agencies to narrow the pool of undocumented immigrants vulnerable to arrest, detention and removal; and raised [*the refugee resettlement ceiling to 125,000 people.*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/26/politics/refugee-cap/index.html)

The Biden administration [*also reversed*](https://www.texastribune.org/2022/06/29/supreme-court-migrant-protection-protocols-remain-mexico-biden/) the so-called "Remain in Mexico" program, which required asylum seekers to wait in Mexico while their cases were reviewed by US immigration courts, and ended [*the Trump-instituted Title 42*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/09/politics/title-42-ending-whats-next-explainer-cec/index.html), the public health order that allowed for the quick expulsion of migrants without hearing their asylum claims, in the spring of 2023.

After Title 42 ended, the [*government returned to its decades-old*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/11/us/title-42-what-happens-next/index.html) section of the US code, known as Title 8. The Biden administration then implemented new, stricter rules that bar asylum claims for migrants who passed through another country on their way to seeking asylum in the US; those who book their appointment online are exempt.

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