

# [***Biden and Trump's dueling border visits will encapsulate a building election clash***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BFC-KWN1-DY7V-G0K4-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Two presidents will [*visit the southern US border*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/26/politics/biden-southern-border-thursday/index.html) Thursday, highlighting the centrality of migrant surges to November's election in a spectacle that will explain why America's polarized ***politics*** has for decades failed to fix a broken immigration system.

[*Joe Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) and his predecessor and possible successor, [*Donald Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/president-donald-trump-45), will tour different sectors of the border in Texas as they spell out dueling arguments on what everyone now agrees is a crisis.

They're already feuding over their first-term records on immigration, and their visits will mark the most visible and intense manifestation yet of their likely rematch.

The ex-president will be in Eagle Pass, scene of a border showdown between the Biden administration and Texas Republican Gov. Greg Abbott. His visit will showcase his dark portrayal of a nation under siege from a torrent of what he claims are migrant criminals and invaders. It's a narrative that he hopes will vault him to the presidency, just as it did in 2016. Trump is promising mass deportations and detention camps if he wins back the White House and is unleashing some of the most extreme anti-migrant rhetoric in modern American history. The apparent inhumanity is the point as he promises a strongman presidency of retribution and channels the anger of his base voters.

Biden, who's been on the defensive over the border for much of his term, will visit Brownsville following his embrace of [*tougher rhetoric and policies*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/21/politics/biden-considering-executive-action-to-close-southern-border-sources-say/index.html). The president hopes to turn the tables on Republicans, including Trump, who crashed a bipartisan Senate bill brimming with many conservative goals, apparently to deprive him of an election-year victory. Biden's first visit to the border in 13 months follows tense discussions in his inner circle as the immigration crisis morphed into a political liability after months of the White House seeking to keep it in the background, sources told CNN.His aides believe the derailing of the immigration bill gives him an opening to hammer the GOP.

But Thursday's theatrics will also show how the treacherous ***politics*** of the border lend themselves to stunts and photo-ops that only thicken the partisan stew that has destroyed successive bipartisan efforts to overhaul an overwhelmed asylum and border enforcement system since the Reagan administration.

Trump and Biden's rival border visits will almost certainly do little to combat the flow of desperate people fleeing economic deprivation, environmental disasters, drug and gang violence and political persecution, which is confronting developed states the world over and almost certain to worsen in the years ahead. The failure of weakened, hyper-polarized democracies to tackle immigration is ironically creating the conditions for demagogues like Trump and European populists to exploit the issue in a way that further weakens those democracies.

Biden's gamble

Biden's campaign is taking a risk in showcasing the president at the border - the symbol of one of his most glaring political vulnerabilities. And although the trip has been in the works before this week, it comes on the heels of Michigan's nominating contest on Tuesday night, when the strength of the "uncommitted" vote in the Democratic primary exposed some of the fragility of Biden's base, with key Arab American and progressive voters upset over his handling of Israel's war in Gaza.

Yet Biden's border visit is a step that epitomizes a more aggressive campaign strategy designed to repair weaknesses in his electoral coalition that have seen him court Black Americans and unionized workers and aggressively confront Trump in recent weeks. The offensive will culminate in the president's annual State of the Union address next week - a critical symbolic pillar of his reelection bid before a huge television audience - where he is expected to chide GOP lawmakers for failing to act to end the border crisis and to try to ease some of his vulnerability on the issue.

His chutzpah appears to have irritated Trump, who is used to a monopoly on political gamesmanship over immigration. "He spent three years not going to the border," Trump told Real America's Voice Tuesday. "So, now he's coming down because I'm going down," Trump said, blasting the president as a "chaser." Biden, who seems to enjoy poking his rival, told reporters on Monday, "I planned it for Thursday, what I didn't know was that my good friend apparently is going."

Joking aside, the president needs to address a glaring weakness over immigration. A CNN poll earlier this month showed just 30% of Americans approve of his performance on the issue and 79% of voters - including majorities across party lines - say that the situation on the border represents a crisis. It's true that conservative media and politicians have spent years trolling the president with over-hyped and misleading coverage about migrant caravan invasions and open borders. But it's also the case that high levels of interceptions of border crossers deeply worries many voters. Republican governors like Abbott and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis appear to have succeeded in [*nationalizing the issue*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/22/politics/greg-abbott-democrats-border-immigration/index.html) by transporting undocumented migrants from the border to democratic jurisdictions and cities.

The immigration issue is particularly tricky for the president since his attempts to adopt tougher positions - and even suggesting he might close the border - risk further alienating progressives, some of whom are already lukewarm about his presidency and whose votes will be critical in November.

But White House and Biden campaign officials see a unique opportunity for Biden to point the finger at Republicans on border security.

They are counting on many voters to understand that a border security package that could have improved the situation at the US southern border was within reach - but that it was tanked by Republicans trying to please Trump.

"It's really about trying to fix the problems and the Republicans don't want to do it. The American voters will see it," Cedric Richmond, a Biden campaign co-chair, told CNN. "You have a former president saying, 'Let's keep it as a problem - it may help me win an election.'"

One senior Biden campaign official said if many Democrats in recent years had tried to avoid talking about immigration, there is now a new opportunity to present a stark split screen thanks to Republican lawmakers' inaction.

"Trump killing the deal is an opportunity for Democrats and Biden to talk about who is actually to going to deliver on solutions," the official said.

Biden administration officials argue, with some justification, that the Trump administration left the immigration system a disaster. They had, for instance, to spend months tracing kids that the ex-president's officials separated from their parents as part of a draconian attempt to deter families from crossing the US-Mexico frontier. Some of Biden's comments during the 2020 campaign were construed, however, as inviting more undocumented migrants to seek asylum in a system already plagued by yearslong backlogs of case loads. Republicans also seized on his repudiation of the "Remain in Mexico" policy that meant asylum seekers had to stay on the other side of the border while their claims were processed. And Biden's decision to immediately undo multiple Trump immigration policies offered an opening to the GOP. The culmination of the Republican assault over immigration came with the GOP-controlled House's impeachment of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, although Democratic Senate control means he's unlikely to be ousted after a trial.

As he seeks to defuse Republican attacks, Biden was handed a lifeline - by the GOP. The House's refusal to even allow a vote on the Senate border compromise package after party figures spent years demanding more spending on enforcement and changes to asylum policy came across as an attempt by Trump to put his own interests before the country's in trying to keep the crisis alive until the election. House Speaker Mike Johnson, meanwhile, is still being tied in hypocritical knots over the issue. On Tuesday at the White House, he justified his unwillingness to vote on the latest $60 billion lifeline for Ukraine by saying, "We must take care of America's needs first" - even though he was instrumental in sabotaging the most conservative immigration measure in years.

Trump's ever more extreme push on immigration

Trump pioneered shocking and often racist rhetoric against migrants in the opening moments of his campaign launch in 2015. In retrospect, that was the moment that he started his transformation of a party that reacted to its 2012 White House defeat by resolving to be court minority voters. As he seeks to win back the White House, despite his disgraced exit from Washington, DC, in 2021 after trying to steal an election and as he faces four criminal trials, Trump is turning up the dial against migrants even more.

"They're coming from Asia, they're coming from the Middle East, coming from all over the world, coming from Africa, and we're not going to stand for it. ... They're destroying our country," Trump said at the Conservative Political Action Conference over the weekend. He added: "They're killing our people. They're killing our country. We have no choice" and complained that "we have languages coming into our country ... they have languages that nobody in this country has ever heard of. It's a horrible thing."

The ex-president's comments, and his vows to launch the biggest deportation operation in American history, are among the growing pile of evidence that suggests his potential second term would provoke even greater challenges to the rule of law and democracy that his riotous first go-around in the Oval Office.

While he is in Texas, Trump is expected to meet members of the state's national guard and to tour Shelby Park alongside the Rio Grande, where Texas has been blocking access for federal border patrol agents. One Trump adviser said the former president would lean into recent "impact stories" like those of the killing of Laken Hope Riley, an Augusta University nursing student, allegedly by an undocumented migrant. Trump is also expected to be interviewed by Sean Hannity of Fox News.

While Thursday's exchanges may have a tangible political impact ahead of the likely general election rematch, they will almost certainly do nothing to resolve the genuine crisis in the immigration system.

And tackling the root cause of the migrant crisis - shattered public order, corruption, and poor governance in developing nations in the Western hemisphere - would need a major international initiative that a fractured global political consensus is as incapable of addressing as Washington is of fixing the domestic immigration mess.

CNN's Alayna Treene contributed to this report.

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