

BORDERLINE DISTORTIONS

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Highlight: When the issue is immigration, the assertions push the border between fact and fiction even more than usual. Let's sort it out.

Body

Given the debate recently, it might surprise you to know that illegal immigration from Mexico is actually down.

A report from the Pew Hispanic Center, a respected nonpartisan research group, found that migration from Mexico has come to a virtual standstill, and the number of illegal immigrants in the United States may even be in decline.

But you wouldn't know that from the overheated debate, which makes it sound as if immigrants are coming in droves, committing kidnappings and then freeloading on food stamps.

When it comes to issues like Arizona's strict enforcement law, President Barack Obama's Dream Act order, or arguments about border security, there are plenty of **distortions**, large and small, that enter the political discourse.

PolitiFact, the fact-checking website of the Tampa Bay Times, has long been tracking and debunking inaccurate statements about immigration. We've found that immigration claims are especially prone to exaggerations and falsehoods. For example, 29 percent of all claims we check earn a False or Pants on Fire. But for immigration, 35 percent do. With that in mind, let's find the border between truth and fiction.

Decapitated bodies in Arizona?

On Monday, the U.S. Supreme Court overruled key portions of an Arizona immigration law that was considered one of the nation's strictest. The court struck down provisions making it a crime for illegal immigrants to seek work and for local officials to jail illegal immigrants for acts that could lead to deportation.

But it gave provisional approval to part of the law that required law enforcement officers to check immigration status if they had reasonable suspicions when stopping people for other reasons.

Supporters of the 2010 law said it was necessary because Arizona couldn't afford the social costs of so much illegal immigration. It's true that illegal immigrants can enroll their children in public schools. When they show up with emergency conditions at hospitals, the hospitals are required to stabilize them.

But the law's supporters - including Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer - went too far with several dramatic but unsubstantiated claims about crime.

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Brewer said the situation was so bad that law enforcement was finding decapitated bodies. "Our law enforcement agencies have found bodies in the desert, either buried or just lying out there, that have been beheaded," she said.

It was a powerful story, but it wasn't true. Medical authorities in Arizona told PolitiFact that in the vast majority of border deaths, the cause was exposure - extreme heat in summer, extreme cold in winter - not criminal violence. The remainder of deaths, fewer than 5 percent, were related to the process of human smuggling, such as auto accidents. PolitiFact rated Brewer's statement Pants on Fire.

Another inaccurate talking point was that Phoenix was "the No. 2 kidnapping capital of the world."

We couldn't find any evidence from law enforcement to prove this statistic. Meanwhile, private security companies told us that Phoenix was nowhere near the top of their lists for kidnappings. These firms were negotiating hostage releases from cities like Mexico City; Caracas, Venezuela; and Tegucigalpa, Honduras. When Arizona Sen. John McCain repeated the erroneous "kidnapping capital" statement in 2010, we rated his statement False.

'Freeloaders'

Another theme we've seen: that illegal immigrants are freeloaders taking advantage of federal welfare programs.

Those types of charges are often repeated in anonymous chain emails, on blogs and Facebook.

"More than 43 percent of all food stamps are given to illegals," said a typical claim, this one from a Facebook post promoting "10 Illegal Alien Facts."

When PolitiFact researched the numbers, though, we found the claim ridiculously false and rated it Pants on Fire. About 46.4 million people receive food stamps, so 43 percent of that number would be just under 20 million. That significantly exceeds estimates for how many illegal immigrants are in the country. The Pew Hispanic Center put the number at 11.2 million in 2010.

On top of that, most social welfare programs bar illegal immigrants from receiving benefits and require proof of immigration status. That includes food stamps, as well as cash welfare assistance, Medicaid, and even the new health care law.

It's true that some children of illegal immigrants qualify for benefits if they were born in the United States and are citizens. (Critics derisively call them "anchor babies.") But there aren't nearly enough of those types of children - an estimated 4 million - to account for 43 percent of food stamp recipients.

Another claim is that illegal immigrants dominate public housing run by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, or HUD. "Nearly 60 percent of all occupants of HUD properties in the U.S. are illegals," the Facebook post said.

That statement too earned a Pants on Fire, because it would require half of all illegal immigrants in the country to live in that housing. And again, HUD requires proof of legal status.

Frank Sharry, executive director of the pro-immigration group America's Voice, said that these kinds of anonymous attacks aren't typical of the public's views of illegal immigrants, but they are out there.

"Polling shows that attitudes toward immigration are improving. But people who don't like it are really nasty," he said. "The haters have gotten more intense."

The Dream Act

A more nuanced debate has been taking place over the Dream Act. On June 15, Obama announced a new policy to suspend deportations for some young illegal immigrants. The move was his way of pursuing the goal of the Dream Act, a bill proposed several times over the years but never passed.

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The full name is the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act. Generally speaking, it pertains to children brought to the United States illegally by parents or relatives. If the young people have stayed out of trouble and were in school or in the military, they would be allowed to move to a legal status and not be deported. The idea has been around since at least 2001, when a bipartisan bill was introduced by Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah.

In 2010, the U.S. Senate moved to take up the Dream Act. But the bill wasn't able to win the 60 votes needed for a full consideration, failing in a vote on Dec. 18, 2010, largely on partisan lines. Republicans who previously supported the measure in years past had either been voted out of office or switched position.

Obama's new policy gives immigration officers the discretion to grant two years of relief from deportation to Dream Act-eligible youth. The officers also can approve work permits.

Obama said his move was necessary since Congress didn't pass the Dream Act. But politics were also in play because Hispanic voters could make a difference in Florida and other key states.

"We should have passed the Dream Act a long time ago," Obama said in Orlando on June 22. "It was written by members of both parties. When it came up for a vote a year and a half ago, Republicans in Congress blocked it. The bill hadn't changed. The need hadn't changed. The only thing that had changed was politics."

We rated Obama's comments Mostly True. The bill had changed over the years, increasing the eligible age of young people from 21 to 30. And while the Dream Act failed largely on partisan lines - with Republicans who had favored it now turning against it - a few Democrats opposed it as well.

Meanwhile, the bill's opponents, like Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., attacked Obama's recent order as "amnesty."

But the mechanics of Obama's order show that's an exaggeration. Legally, amnesty is a permanent pardon. Obama's order only defers deportation; it doesn't end the possibility of it. Additionally, the young people have to meet certain criteria showing that they have stayed out of trouble and have been in school or in the military. PolitiFact rated DeMint's claim Mostly False.

Obama vs. Romney

Obama's move on immigrant youth prompted Republican nominee Mitt Romney to release more details on his own ideas on immigration.

Romney supports increasing legal immigration, including more visas for highly skilled workers and faster processing of visas for temporary agricultural workers. He would also grant permanent residency to any foreign nationals who obtain advanced degrees in math, science or engineering. He reiterated calls for more border security.

But Romney declined to say what he would do about Obama's order if elected.

"Some people have asked if I will let stand the president's executive order. The answer is that I will put in place my own long-term solution that will replace and supersede the president's temporary measure," he said.

Obama, on the other hand, continues to support comprehensive immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship, as well as formal passage of the Dream Act.

He also favors border security and often touts the fact that his administration has significantly increased the number of Border Patrol agents. We rated True his statement that the number of Border Patrol agents has doubled since 2004 to 20,000.

But Obama also claimed last year that the border fences between the United States and Mexico are now "basically complete." PolitiFact rated that Mostly False. A Government Accountability Office report on border security acknowledged progress on the fences. But it also noted that "the Southwest border continues to be vulnerable to cross-border illegal activity, including the smuggling of humans and illegal narcotics."

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Still, as we noted earlier, border crossings from Mexico to the United States are down, not up, and there are many more agents patrolling the border. So when Texas Gov. Rick Perry said in a Republican debate last year that "the federal government has not engaged in (border security) at all," we rated that Pants on Fire.

In the days since Obama's announcement of his order on the Dream Act, advocates for immigration say reaction has been largely positive and may signal a shifting of public opinion, one more favorable to comprehensive proposals.

"I think the public is saying, how do we solve this? And something that looks like a solution, the public is reacting well to," said Tamar Jacoby of ImmigrationWorks USA, a pro-immigration business coalition.

Still, Romney often attacked his rivals as soft on immigration during the Republican primary, and went on to win the nomination, noted Steven Camarota, research director for the Center for Immigration Studies, which advocates for low levels of immigration.

And though Democrats try to paint Republicans as anti-immigration, the Democratic Party has members and interest groups that are opposed, he said.

"Obama recognizes that once he proposes specifics, the cleavages in his party loom much larger," he said.

As we've long observed here at PolitiFact, specific proposals also give opponents ammunition to launch even more political attacks. When the election's winners arrive in Washington in 2013, the issue of immigration will be there waiting for them - along with the inevitable **distortions**.

Staff writers Louis Jacobson, Molly Moorhead and Jon Greenberg contributed to this report. Angie Drobic Holan can be reached at aholan@tampabay.com

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The statement

"Phoenix, Arizona, is the No. 2 kidnapping capital of the world."

John McCain

The ruling: FALSE

* * *

The statement

"More than 43 percent of all food stamps are given to illegals."

Facebook post

The ruling: PANTS ON FIRE

* * *

The statement

President Obama's new immigration plan "is amnesty."

Sen. Jim DeMint

The ruling: MOSTLY FALSE

* * *

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About this series

Today we continue an occasional series that will apply the rigor of our PolitiFact approach to broad topics that will be central issues of the presidential campaign. Our goal is to give you a toolbox full of facts and context to assess the claims that are certain to come in the weeks ahead.

We continue our series with immigration.

Graphic

PHOTO - JOHN PENDYGRAFT - Times (2009): Mato, a U.S. Customs dog trained to sniff out guns and cash, inspects cars entering Juarez, Mexico, from El Paso, Texas, in April 2009. According to a respected nonpartisan research group, illegal immigration from Mexico is actually down, despite common perceptions. PHOTO (3) ILLUSTRATION - STEVE MADDEN - Times

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Person: JAN BREWER (74%); BARACK OBAMA (58%)

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