BROOKINGS

COMMENTARY

How 2026's divisive immigration politics could lead to a solution down the road

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- → While President Trump initially benefited from voter concerns over border security, his subsequent ramp-up of immigration enforcement and the resulting deaths of U.S. citizens in Minneapolis contributed to a sharp decline in public approval.
- → The share of the foreign-born population in the United States reached 14.8% in 2024, a level not seen since 1890, contributing to a political tipping point and a resurgence of anti-immigrant sentiment.
- → Despite a history of partisan gridlock, the political damage suffered by both parties over immigration policy may finally create the necessary space for a comprehensive and humane long-term solution.

Editor's note: This article is part of "The 2026 midterm elections," a year-long series in which Brookings scholars assess the dynamics of the campaign season, the strategies of candidates and parties, the opinions of voters, and the broader implications for democracy, governance, and leadership in America.

Could the United States be on the verge of a new politics of immigration, focused more on long-term solutions than on divisive, short-term controversies over deportation policies? To ask the question risks seeming unduly hopeful, perhaps even naive. Yet, without intending to, President Trump has transformed the public mood on immigration in ways that have hurt him politically—but also, and more importantly, may open space for efforts to address the nation's immigration challenges comprehensively.

The political power of the immigration issue should not have come as a surprise. Since the failure of President George W. Bush's effort to pursue ↗ bipartisan immigration reform in 2007, the question has become more and more partisan. Republicans, at both the rank-and-file and elite levels, have largely abandoned ↗ Bush's openness to immigrants and his search for a broad settlement. The shift was reinforced by the Tea Party movement's rise ↗ during President Obama's first years in office. Yes, it was animated by attitudes toward taxes and government, but another of its driving concerns was opposition and even hostility toward immigration. It thus anticipated the direction Trump would set.

History also suggested that a backlash against immigration was, at least, a strong possibility in light of the long-term rise in migration to the United States. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act ↗ had the effect of increasing immigration and diversifying the identity of new immigrants. The failure to update the nation's immigration laws to match the needs of the economy helped unleash a wave of illegal immigration ↗ in the 1980s and 1990s. The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act ↗, a bipartisan effort signed by President Reagan, was a response to this surge. But labor demand and the ongoing attraction of the United States to newcomers continued to outstrip efforts to regulate the flow.

There seems to be a political tipping point where immigration sentiment is concerned, depending on the numbers involved. In 1970, the proportion of foreign-born Americans hit a low point of 4.7%. By 2024, as the Migration Policy Institute ↗ reported, it hit 14.8%. The last time the immigrant share of the population was that high: 1890. In both periods, the mix of immigrants changed as well. The waves from 1880 to 1920

included many Eastern and Southern Europeans, in contrast to earlier waves from Britain, Ireland, and northern Europe. The post-1965 mix included many more immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

A backlash against the earlier immigration surge led to a steady increase in anti-immigrant sentiment, culminating in the passage of Draconian restrictions in the 1920s ↗. The country now confronts a similar backlash, and Trump channeled, aggravated, and successfully used it for his political purposes.

In the four decades since the 1986 law, politics has made it impossible to take another crack at a workable solution. Even when there were enough Republican votes in Congress to pass a bill, GOP leaders were often reluctant to move forward, fearing the anti-immigration anger in the grassroots of the party and opposition within their own congressional ranks.

A comprehensive immigration bill passed ↗ the Senate in 2013 with 14 Republican votes, an indicator that even in the wake of the setbacks under Bush, bipartisan sentiment for reform had not entirely disappeared. The bill created a path for citizenship for undocumented immigrants, but won over those Republicans with tough provisions ↗ increasing border security and requiring that employers sign up for E-Verify systems to check the immigration status of potential employees. But House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) refused ↗ to bring it to the floor, even though a coalition involving a minority of Republicans and a majority of Democrats seemed in a good position to pass something like it. As time went on, Democrats were increasingly fearful that compromises ↗ aimed at forcing the issue might split their own base, increase the saliency of an issue that seemed mostly to help Republicans, especially in swing districts, and might be blocked anyway.

The failure of Congress and successive administrations of both parties to deal with the issue, combined with ongoing opposition to immigration, created Trump's political opportunity. Yet in just over a year in office, Trump has lost the political initiative and

aroused a broadly based rebellion against approaches majorities now see as inhumane and going far beyond their wishes.

Immigration, particularly public unhappiness with disorder at the nation's southern border, was one of the decisive issues behind Trump's election in 2024. Even supporters of President Biden and critics of Trump saw the former president's administration as slow ↗ in dealing with border problems. When Biden did propose tough border measures, and Congress seemed on the verge of enacting a bipartisan bill to put them into law, Trump told his party ↗ to block it. He wanted the issue for November, not a solution blessed by Biden, even if it contained many elements on Trump's own wish list. Biden eventually turned to executive orders ↗ that began to stem the flow of immigrants, but he and Vice President Kamala Harris continued to take the blame for the border troubles, and when he took office, Trump imposed his tough border regime. It had the intended effect, even if he was building off what Biden had already put in place.

The numbers on U.S. Border Patrol encounters with migrants crossing into the United States from Mexico tell a compelling story. As the Pew Research Center reported ↗, they hit a peak under Biden of 249,740 in December 2023. By December 2024, they had fallen to 47,320. In December 2025, they were down to 6,478. Such encounters, Pew noted in February, were at their lowest level in more than 50 years. The country noticed the change. It's notable that even as approval ratings on Trump's overall approach to immigration sagged, support for his border policies held up. An AP/NORC ↗ survey in December, for example, found that while only 38% of Americans approved of his handling of immigration, 50% approved of his handling of border security.

But instead of pocketing and touting his political victory on the border, Trump ramped up immigration enforcement actions (particularly in cities led by Democrats) that led to roundups of citizens ↗ and legal immigrants as well as the undocumented, and were not focused, as Trump had promised, on illegal immigrants involved in criminal activities. Deporting those rounded up to prisons in foreign countries ↗ proved deeply unpopular, as did the lack of due process and the seemingly undisciplined and often violent actions of masked ICE and border patrol agents. His policies hit a crisis point in

Minneapolis in January with the killings of two American citizens, Renée Nicole Good by an ICE agent, and Alex Pretti by Border Patrol agents. A broadly based community uprising ↗ forced Trump to back down and withdraw his agents from the area. The Good and Pretti deaths, in turn, called attention to the deaths of six people ↗ in ICE custody in detention centers in Pennsylvania, Georgia, and California.

The result: Trump turned one of his best issues against himself. The almost perfect symmetry of the findings of The Economis*t*/YouGov poll is striking. In March 2025 ↗, 51% approved of Trump's handling of immigration while 44% disapproved. In March 2026 ↗, 43% approved and 52% disapproved. Polling ↗ averages ↗ showed similar declines. Especially damaging to Trump and his party was the sharp decline in support for the president among Latinos, with whom he made major inroads in the 2024 election. In The Economist/YouGov survey, his approval rating among Hispanics stood at 48% approve, 47% disapprove in March 2025; by March 2026, his ratings among Latinos had fallen to 31% approve, 60% disapprove.

In the narrowest political sense, immigration has turned from an issue that clearly worked for Trump into one now more likely to help Democrats in this fall's midterm elections. But the shifting politics of the issue could, in turn, open the way for a serious effort to reach a comprehensive solution—if not under Trump, then after he leaves office. After the drubbing Democrats took on the issue in 2024, they are more likely to perceive an interest in a compromise that would create a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, combined with border protections and approaches to asylum and future flows that are both humane and realistic. Republicans, especially if they suffer in the 2026 elections, may come to a similar conclusion now that the country has spoken clearly in opposition to the administration's harsh and extreme approach. In a polarized time, sensible compromise is difficult to reach, and few issues have been as intractable as immigration. But we may be reaching the point when both parties have suffered enough political damage to consider the electoral as well as the substantive value of a long-term solution to our nation's immigration challenges. We should not have to wait another 40 years.

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