

America Needs an Immigration Department

di William A. Galston

Immigration has roiled the politics of many Western democracies over the past decade. Leaders who failed to address this issue effectively have been drummed out of office, and populist nationalist parties have gained popularity just about everywhere.

The U.S. is no exception. The issue fueled [Donald Trump](#)'s rise in 2016, and Joe Biden's epic mismanagement of the border helped Mr. Trump return to the presidency in 2024.

Understandably, Mr. Trump took the outcome of the latter election as a mandate for much tougher policies, not only at the border but within it. But it has become clear that he misread the sentiments of the American people. While they broadly approve of his border policies, they disagree with his deportation strategy.

Throughout the 2024 campaign, Mr. Trump focused on the worst of the worst—illegal immigrants who were members of gangs and cartels or who had committed felonies. But federal agents swept through cities across the country, catching people whose only offense was their illegal presence, who were working hard to support their families and contribute to their communities. Voters saw tactics they couldn't accept—excessive force, denial of due process and hasty deportations.

Approval of Mr. Trump's handling of immigration has declined steadily. An Economist/YouGov poll conducted in early February 2025 found that 51% of Americans approved of his immigration policies while 40% disapproved. A year later, only 40% approved and 53% disapproved. The decline was especially sharp among young adults and independents, groups that moved toward Mr. Trump in 2024.

The shift in public sentiment helps explain the administration's abrupt turn from confrontation to conciliation in Minneapolis and its recent decision to withdraw most

immigration agents from that city. It also contributed to the administration's quiet withdrawal of National Guard troops from Chicago, Los Angeles and Portland, Ore.

Yet Mr. Trump's aggressive approach isn't the only problem. After the tumult subsides, we will be left with two long-term problems—obsolete immigration policies that haven't been revised in decades and institutional structures that no longer fit their purpose.

On the policy front, Congress needs to rethink the law's current emphasis on family reunification, its neglect of the country's economic needs, the inadequacy of guest-worker programs, and failing strategies for those seeking asylum and refugee status as their numbers have overwhelmed our capacity to address individual cases fairly and efficiently. Lawmakers also need to revise policies that hinder cooperation across the layers of our federal system to deport dangerous felons. When federal policies impose fiscal, administrative or manpower burdens on states and localities, there should be a way of compensating them.

On the institutional front, it is time to re-examine the Department of Homeland Security, which was created in the wake of 9/11 to fight terrorism. Some of the nearly two dozen agencies brought together in the largest government reorganization in decades fit squarely into this mission, while others didn't. Fighting terrorism is only one goal of immigration policy.

As President George W. Bush said as he announced his administration's support for creating the department, "new challenges require new organization structures." We have reached another such moment. The rising importance of immigration in our nation's economy, society and politics points to the need to create a separate Department of Immigration, which would include elements of Customs and Border Protection, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. It should also include a new Bureau of Immigration Analysis to assess the needs of the economy and examine the outcome of current and proposed policies on states and localities as well as on key economic sectors.

When DHS was created, Congress adjusted its committee structure to ensure unified oversight of this massive new entity. A new Immigration Department should trigger

similar changes—ideally, new committees in the House and Senate with jurisdiction over all activities of the new department and nothing else.

The Homeland Security Act of 2002 defined one element of the new department’s mission as ensuring “that the functions of the agencies and subdivisions within the Department that are not related directly to securing the homeland are not diminished or neglected”—an acknowledgment that they likely would be. Although the statute tried to lean against these dangers, it was only partially successful. We need a new department to meet the challenges our country faces.