



Biden has a migration plan for the Northern Triangle

by Andrew Thompson

Canning House Associate Fellow

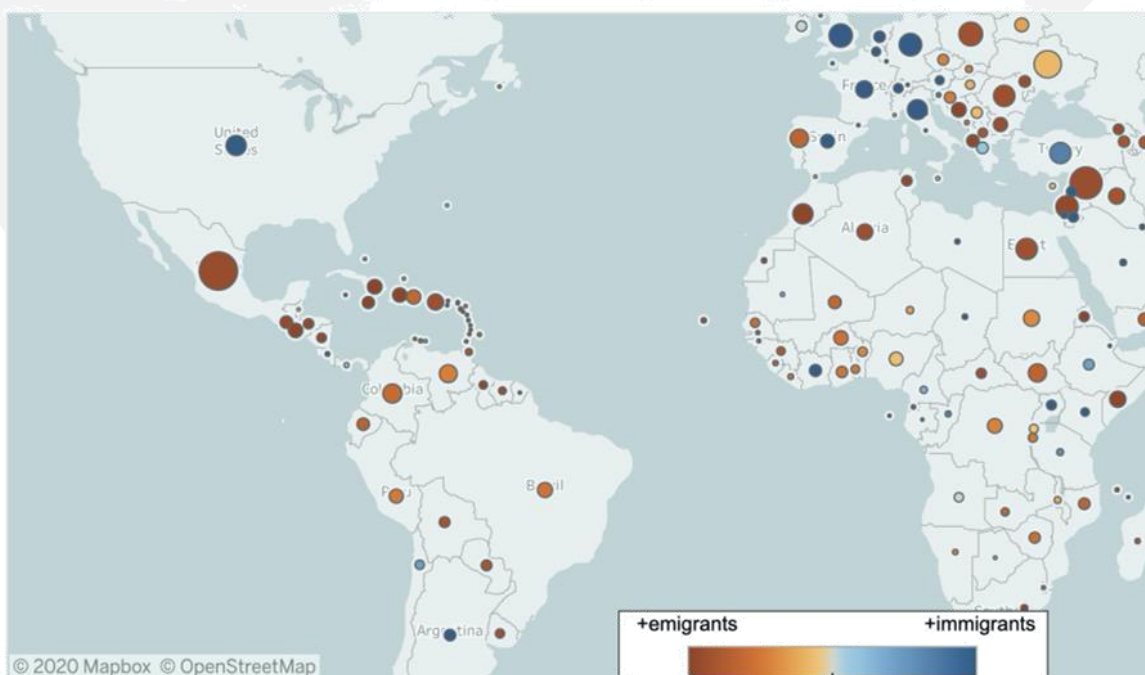
What happened?

With US Democratic Party senator Joe Biden currently leading the opinion polls in the US presidential race, there is interest in what he proposes to do to reduce illegal immigration from Central America.

The details

The incumbent Donald Trump is notorious for his anti-immigration, “Mexican bashing” and wall-building stance in the 2016 elections. Perhaps less known is the fact that two years earlier in 2014 Biden was asked by then-president Barack Obama to come up with a plan to restrict illegal immigration from the three ‘Northern Triangle’ Central American republics: El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

Total Immigrant and Emigrant Populations by Country, mid-2019 Estimates



Source: [Migration Policy Institute \(MPI\) Data Hub](#)

The result was the ‘Alliance for Prosperity’ a package of law enforcement measure coupled with economic and social reforms, designed to encourage Central Americans to stay home. US funding for the programme totalled US\$750mn, with the Northern Triangle governments making matching contributions. Now, as part of his 2020 election platform, Biden is proposing a “mark 2” version of the Alliance. He says it will be a comprehensive four year, US\$4bn strategy that will mobilise private sector investment, improve security and the rule of law, address endemic corruption, and prioritise poverty reduction and economic development.

Success is not guaranteed. The original “Alliance for Prosperity” was subject to long delays and overshadowed by Donald Trump’s subsequent and more confrontational “closed door” policies. Trump also threatened to cut foreign aid to the Northern Triangle governments if they didn’t do more to prevent migration. The effectiveness of the Alliance is hard to track, but there are some claims that emigration from El Salvador dropped as a result of the programme while it increased from Honduras and Guatemala.

Latin America will certainly welcome a less confrontational approach from Biden, along other potential moves by a Democratic administration such as extending temporary protected status (TPS) for existing Latin American visa holders in the US and continuing the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) programme. A Biden administration will also try to offer a “pathway to citizenship” for the country’s estimated 12mn undocumented immigrants, of whom about 5mn are Mexicans and 1.9mn are from Central America. However, that is a big and complex political task – one that proved too much for two-term president Barack Obama.

There are also reasons for scepticism. The COVID-19 crisis has made the problem much bigger in Central America with GDP expected to fall by 6% or more this year, pushing millions into unemployment. Many of those will once more try and find a better life in the US.

What does it mean?

If Biden becomes the next US president, he is likely to engage the Northern Triangle in a more constructive discussion on migration issues. But these remain complex and there are unlikely to be any “quick solutions.”

About the Author

Andrew Thompson

La Rambla Research Ltd.



As well as being a Canning House Associate Fellow, Andrew is a former foreign correspondent (Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro) and a broadcaster for the BBC's Latin American Service. Working through La Rambla Research Ltd., he writes about economics, political risk, and business in Latin America.

These stories are also available on Andrew's blog site, [La Rambla Research](#).