

23122 The Biden administration is quietly completing bits of Donald Trump's wall

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On the campaign trail, Joe Biden pledged he would build “not another foot” of border wall as president. But in the face of record numbers of migrants arriving at America’s southern border with Mexico, he has quietly reversed course, agreeing to fill in some glaring gaps that were left when he abruptly halted construction on his first day in office. Keeping quiet about the wall-work, Mr Biden has not wanted to telegraph the decision and risk alienating backers who associate the border wall with Donald Trump.

November’s midterm election will not be the first in which illegal immigration and the border have featured prominently. However, in 2022 they are not just a conduit for partisan emotions. The border is a problem for Democrats because of the sheer volume of people coming and the White House’s refusal to lay out a compelling federal response. The administration’s strategy is basically “waiting, thinking that things are going to get better,” says Henry Cuellar, a Texas Democratic congressman who is seeking re-election and has been publicly critical of Mr Biden’s handling of the border.

If anything, the situation is only going to get worse. America’s relatively strong economy acts as a pull for people suffering from poverty, violence and inflation. Recent hurricanes will aggravate a looming food crisis in the Caribbean and further stoke migration. From last October until the end of August, border officials encountered migrants around 2.2m times on the southern border, up by a quarter from the year before and more than double the number of encounters in fiscal year 2019.

Since Mr Biden took office, some 1.5m people have probably been released into America, some combination of asylum-seekers, people who couldn’t be sent back to their home country, unaccompanied minors who could not be detained at length, and others. Despite tepid assurances by Kamala Harris, the vice-president, who was tasked with managing migration from Central America, that “the border is secure”, few believe it.

Republican candidates for office so often emphasise the border because it merges two priorities for Republican voters, immigration and law and order, says Cal Jillson, a professor at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. According to recent YouGov polls commissioned by *The Economist*, immigration is the second-most important issue to Republican voters, after inflation, with 12% of them ranking it first, versus a mere 2% of Democrats doing so. The border has become an embodiment of “the two Americas”, says Marc Sumerlin of Evenflow Macro, a research firm.

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