

REPORT

IMMIGRATION AND BORDER POLITICS: BUILDING BRIDGES OR BUILDING WALLS



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Immigration and border politics: building bridges or building walls

Alejandra Castañeda

Border tropes:

Prevalent political discourses in the U.S. on the border refer to it as a space of fragility, of suspicion, of insecurity. The wall becomes the place to stop the enemy, the other that is different, a lesser person, the alien invader. The wall signifies the object that will fulfill the promise to “make America great again”.

What is evident in anti-immigrant discourse is the construction of the border as a space of insecurity, which explains the basic political positioning by republicans: border security comes first, thus, before any consideration of an immigration reform, security of the border is what matters the most. For republicans, the border is the empty signifier where everything that is wrong or failed in the U.S. finds a location, where the wrong is made meaningful.

Anti-immigrant discourse and politics:

Using discourse against immigrants to bolster electoral popularity has long been a strategy used by politicians. Every electoral cycle, immigration and the border become issues emphasized by candidates to attract attention and bring in voters who identify with these topics.

In the battle between President Barak Obama and Mitt Romney in 2012, the republican candidate insisted in using anti-immigrant rhetoric, believing that what is popular among hard-core conservatives is also acceptable for the majority of

Americans. This strategy proved to be very costly on the election of November of 2012 when Romney lost to Obama by 4% of the popular vote, but sharply losing the minority vote with 72% against, and only 27% in favor, a factor that became key in swing states such as Colorado, Nevada and Florida.

Despite the backlash republicans faced in 2012 with minority populations, it seems that the lesson has not been learned. The election season that began in 2015 has brought more of the same negative rhetoric with an addition of hate speech that has insidiously reverberated throughout the country.

Trump, the border and the facts

Border enforcement and security has turned into a Republican mantra, especially since the particularly vociferous candidate Donald Trump has used it to propel his presidential candidacy and succeeded in doing so. Trump's exploit produced an effect among republican candidates who began to move further and further into xenophobic anti-immigrant positions. One of the ways in which Trump proposes to make "America Great Again" is by building a wall between Mexico and the U.S. However, Trump border imaginings say very little about the nature of the real border in itself.

The Wall:

A fact unbeknownst by a wide majority of Americans is that a wall already exists between Mexico and the U.S., which share a 1,954 miles border. Currently, the existing wall covers 352.8 miles of primary or pedestrian fencing, and 300 miles of vehicle fencing of a total of 653 miles of shared border between Mexico and the United States that has been identified by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) as appropriate for fencing and to set up barriers.¹

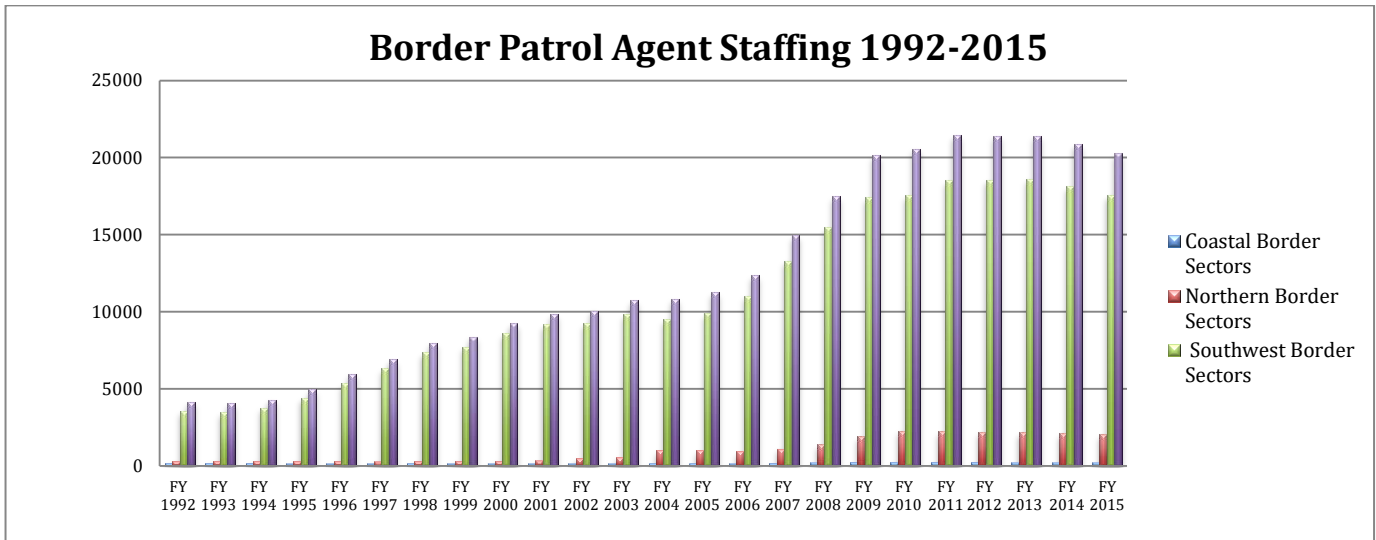
¹ See Argueta, Carla. "Border Security: Immigration Enforcement Between Ports of Entry." Congressional Research Service, April 19, 2016, P. 14. 7-5700, www.crs.gov, R42138. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/homesecc/R42138.pdf>

In the urban border areas, after the first border layer, stands a second border fence (or wall) of 36 miles. In addition to this secondary fence there are 14 miles of tertiary pedestrian fencing behind the secondary fence. Both fences have been constructed at an average cost that ranges between \$2.8 million and \$3.9 million per mile in different areas of Texas, Arizona and California, as reported by U.S. Customs and Border Protection Agency (CBP) to GAO in 2008.² However, the construction of the wall in the more remote areas implies an estimated cost of as much as \$16 million dollars per mile.

Border Enforcement:

Within the prevention through attrition philosophy/policy applied at the border by the U.S. federal government since the mid 1990s, aside from budget appropriated for fencing, two other facts stand out with regards to investment in border enforcement: border patrol agent staffing and budget assigned to CBP.

Figure 1:

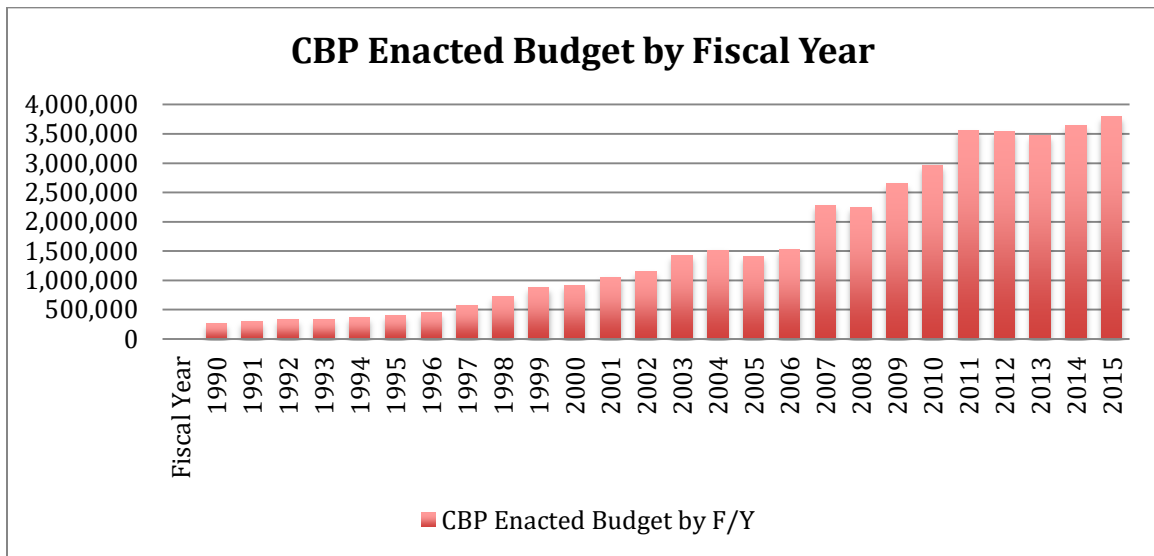


² Government Accountability Office. "Secure Border Initiative Fence Construction Costs". Report, January 29, 2009, Congressional Committees. P. 4. <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d09244r.pdf>

Figure 1 shows how during the Clinton administration border patrol staffing surged by a 43.7%, going from 4,028 to 9,212 in 8 years. During the Bush administration agent staffing increased by a 52.6%, from 9,215 to 17,499 agents. Finally, during the Obama administration agent staffing went from 17,499 in 2008 to a high of 21,444 in 2011, decreasing to 20,273 in 2015, for a 13.7 % increase in 7 years.

Anti-immigrant political rhetoric also ignores the level of funds already spent by the U.S. government for securing and enforcing the southern border in the last two decades. In addition to the budget already assigned to building the wall between Mexico and the U.S., and the resources used to increase agent staffing along the border, stands out the budget allocated to CBP and how it has augmented in the last 25 years. Very noticeable is its increment in the past ten years, which has more than doubled from 1,409,480 in 2005 to 3,797,820 in 2015.³

Figure 2:



³ Source: U.S. Border Patrol, "Enacted Border Patrol Program Budget by Fiscal Year," February 2013 <http://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/documents/BP%20Budget%20History%201990-2013.pdf>

Also Source: CRS. "Border Security: Immigration Enforcement Between Ports of Entry." Carla Argueta. Congressional Research Service, April 19, 2016. Op. Cit.

The Border and the economy:

An additional fact that gets lost in the political anti-immigrant rhetoric is the significant economic exchange between Mexico and the U.S., most of which happens through the border. The level of the exchange of goods between these two countries is another widely ignored fact of the interconnected nature of their relationship. As stated by the Border Legislative Conference, “today, the U.S. is Mexico’s largest trade partner in both exports and imports while Mexico is the United States’ second largest buyer, and third largest supplier of goods.”⁴

An example of the intensity and importance of the U.S.-Mexico interrelated economies is the information with regards to trade among these countries. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2015 the trade in goods between Mexico and the United States was:⁵

TOTAL 2015	236,377.40	294,741.10	-58,363.70
	Exports	Imports	Balance

More illuminating of the long term relevance of the interconnected nature of both countries economies is Figure 3, on Trade in Goods with Mexico. Even though the balance is negative, in reality it is deceiving since many of these imports are from products that were exported from the United States to be processed in Mexico and made their way back to the U.S. (particularly clear in the auto industry).⁶

⁴ Border Legislative Conference. http://www.borderlegislators.org/border_facts_eng.htm

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c2010.html#2015>

⁶ Wilson, Christopher. *Working Together: Economic Ties between the United States and Mexico*. Woodrow Wilson Center, Dec. 13, 2011. Retrieved May 12, 2016.

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/working-together-economic-ties-between-the-united-states-and-mexico>

Figure 3:⁷



The relationship between Mexico and the U.S. is highly beneficial for both countries. Trade with Mexico also implies jobs in the United States that are dependent on the economic ties established through commerce with Mexico. In 2011, for example, according to the Woodrow Wilson Center, “6 million jobs in the U.S. depended on trade with Mexico, a majority of them located in California (692,000 jobs) and Texas (463,000 jobs).”⁸ In this sense, abstract figures and numbers on imports and exports materialize in a very concrete way in jobs, business, services that trickle down to the personal, local, and regional economies.

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c2010.html#2015>. NOTE: All figures are in millions of U.S. dollars on a nominal basis, not seasonally adjusted unless otherwise specified. Details may not equal totals due to rounding.

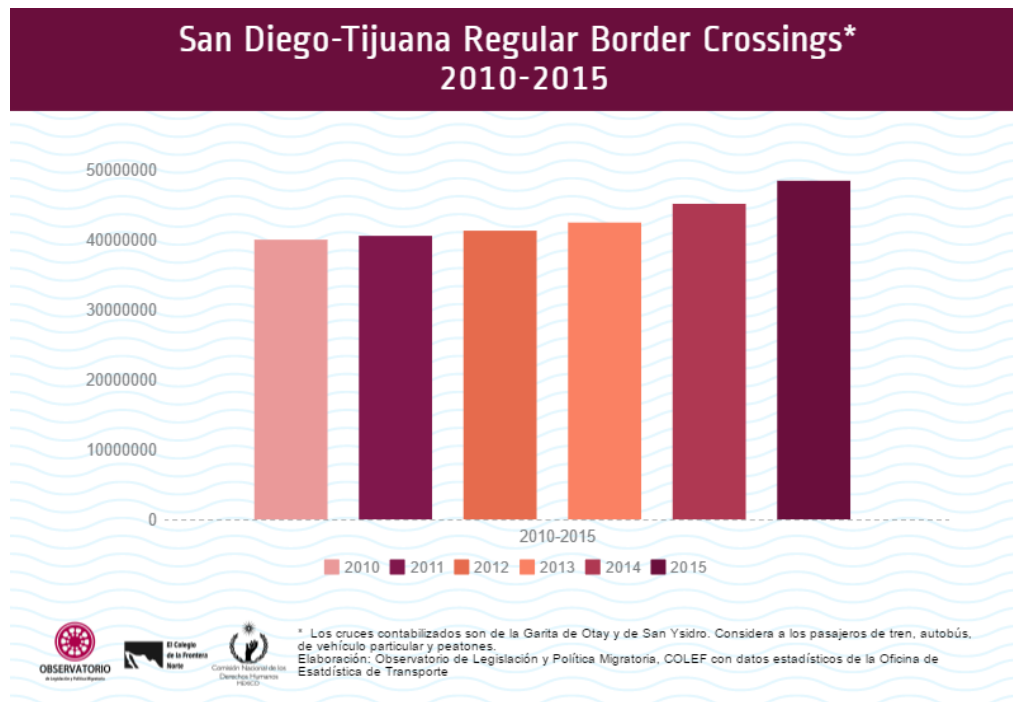
⁸ Wilson, Christopher. *Working Together: Economic Ties between the United States and Mexico*. Woodrow Wilson Center, Dec. 13, 2011. Retrieved May 12, 2016. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/working-together-economic-ties-between-the-united-states-and-mexico>

Crossing the border:

Connectedness between Mexico and the U.S., specifically at the border, is a matter of everyday life. Another widely unknown fact by the American public is the amount of daily and yearly regular border crossings between Mexico and the U.S., a fact that demonstrates how for border regions, the border is a part of every day life; it is livable, manageable, and productive.

The Bureau of Transportation Statistics reported that the regular border crossings of people (pedestrians, passengers in vehicles, and in buses) amounted to an approximate total of 181,273,000 in the year of 2015.⁹ This piece of information regarding regular border crossings, brings to light an aspect of how the Mexico-U.S. border really functions, being the busiest border in the world, with people and goods crossing back and forth on a daily basis.¹⁰

Figure 4:¹¹



⁹ Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS), U.S. department of Transportation.

http://transborder.bts.gov/programs/international/transborder/TBDR_BC/TBDR_BCQ.html

¹⁰ Castañeda, Alejandra. Flujos fronterizos y política migratoria,

<http://observatoriocolef.org/Articulo/497>

¹¹ Include passengers in train, bus, and personal vehicles, and pedestrian crossers. See

http://transborder.bts.gov/programs/international/transborder/TBDR_BC/TBDR_BCQ.html

At a regional level, on the California side of the border, the San Diego County (San Ysidro and Otay) and Tijuana international port of entry witnessed the crossing of 48,478,460 million people in 2015. Likewise, during the 2005-2015 decade, this region saw more than 500 million people crossing at the ports of entry, this fact demonstrates that managing a complex border is possible, it is necessary, and it is something that needs to be managed rather than feared and rejected. For such an intricate region, closing the border as proposed and so loudly vociferated in the electoral campaign trail, is certainly not an option.

Walls or bridges:

Data on regular border crossings and economic trade demonstrates how the border can be constructed and conceived as a space of exchanges, connections and mutual benefit. The San Diego-Tijuana region has proven that a positive approach towards the border and its fluidity is a better overall strategy to create strong economies and communities. Thus, rather than building walls the lesson learned is that it is better and more productive to build bridges.

For California in particular it is vital to develop visions and discourses that portray the border as a space of exchange of goods, services, ideas and culture that mutually enrich the economies and the people living in the region. To understand that a border where every year 40 million people come across in a regular manner does not need to have a bigger wall, instead, it requires the development of a smart border with strategies that, rather than block, facilitate and manage border crossings in a secure manner. Political discourses that represent it otherwise only demonstrate how far removed they are from the border regional reality.



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