

## **ABOUT TEXAS HOUSE BILL 20**

### **Beto O'Rourke**

The Texas legislature is debating a bill (HB 20) that would authorize militias to patrol our border with Mexico, giving deputized private citizens the power to arrest migrants and asylum seekers. It's a terrible idea that will undoubtedly produce greater insecurity in border communities, complicate things for law enforcement, further militarize the border, increase suffering and harm to immigrants and non-immigrants alike and boost the boondoggle of state border spending.

For context, our state government spent \$4 billion in the last budget cycle to deter undocumented border crossings and involuntarily activated thousands of members of the Texas Guard, only to see those undocumented crossings increase. Good money after bad, the Republican majority now proposes spending another \$4.6 billion in the next cycle for the same purpose in addition to creating a "Border Protection Unit" under HB 20.

This is on top of unprecedented recent federal outlays. Since the Department of Homeland Security was created twenty years ago, D.C. has spent over \$350 billion on immigration enforcement, much of that focused on our southern border. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) spending has tripled, as has that on Customs and Border Protection (CBP). In 2003, there were a little over 10,000 Border Patrol agents. Today there are almost 20,000. And if additional spending, enforcement and detention capacity were not enough, the federal government, in both Democratic and Republican administrations, has erected more than 700 miles of border walls.

In addition to budget busting infrastructure and personnel spending, immigration policies have also undergone aggressive changes in recent years. Under President Obama our country embarked on a massive expansion of family detention and deportation. President Trump separated families and kept kids in cages. While changing some of his predecessors' approach to immigration, President Biden has still vowed to renew Trump's proposed "transit ban" on those seeking asylum in America who haven't first requested it in another country.

If spending ever more billions of dollars, militarizing the border, threatening migrants with ever steeper penalties and consequences (including taking their children from them) actually worked, we wouldn't continue to see tens of thousands of migrants and asylum seekers at our border each month. Instead, this punitive, cruel and enforcement-only approach has produced record deaths (853 migrants died crossing the U.S.-Mexico border in fiscal year 2022), suffering and unsustainable increases in government spending. And it has done nothing to address the drivers of migration and asylum seeking.

And yet, there is hope that we can meet these challenges and effectively deter undocumented migration while reducing government spending and demilitarizing the border.

But it will require Presidential leadership.

President Biden must make this issue his priority. If he does so, we have a chance.

He alone, for example, can use the extraordinary convening power of the Presidency to bring together the leaders of this hemisphere to define a comprehensive solution. From Canada to Chile, and every country in between, we must ensure that the nations of the Americas are working together to address the instability, criminality and impunity that undermine personal safety and civil society in countries like Haiti, Venezuela, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. We must also acknowledge the toll that climate change, unfair trade agreements and the war on drugs have had on the most vulnerable people and societies of this hemisphere and work to fix the problems that are of our own doing.

The Americas should be this nation's number one foreign policy priority. Otherwise, we will continue to have these challenges at our borders and in our politics for the foreseeable future.

We must ask our neighbors in North and South America to step up their effort to take in refugees and asylum seekers, so that no one country is overburdened. We must also rewrite our own immigration and asylum laws to ensure that there is a legal and orderly path for more migrants to safely and legally make their way into the United States.

Only the President can lead on these issues, and he should.

Failure to do this, failure to ensure that the federal government is effectively overseeing immigration and managing our borders, will only embolden states like Texas to take matters into their own hands with stupid and cruel policies that will do immeasurable harm to the people of this state and to the interests of our country. In fact, the ultimate goal of HB 20 is to overturn the Supreme Court precedent that places immigration squarely within the purview of the federal government. Texas Republicans are hoping that after becoming law, HB 20 will be challenged and be decided before the current Court which could make immigration a matter of "states' rights."

If you live in Texas, I encourage you to push back against bad legislation like HB 20 by calling your state representatives. There's an outside chance that might influence the final outcome of this bill.

But even more importantly, wherever you live, I encourage you to press this President to do more to ensure that immigration and border policy aren't decided by the radical right wing of the Texas legislature. He still has time to act, and we desperately need him to.

**Beto**