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ASSESSING US IMMIGRATION POLICY IN THE SECOND TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

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WELCOMING AND INTRODUCTION:

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FIRESIDE CHAT:

THE HONORABLE MARÍA SALAZAR (R-FL)

United States House of Representatives

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PANEL DISCUSSION:

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MODERATOR: TARA WATSON

John C. and Nancy D. Whitehead Chair, Senior Fellow, and Director,
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WATSON: Hello, welcome everyone. We're so delighted that you're here for today's discussion of immigration in 2025 and beyond. Want to offer both a welcome to those of you in the room, as well as the many people who are visiting us online. And what we're here to talk about today is a complex set of issues about what's been happening in the first year of the Trump administration. I am Tara Watson. I direct the Center for Economic Security and Opportunity here at Brookings, and I've been interested in immigration for a long time. I've had plenty to think about recently, as you can hardly open a newspaper or look at the headlines without seeing something about immigration, whether it's ramped up enforcement, new funding for detention centers a hundred thousand dollars fee for an H1B visa, a new travel ban the end of protected status for a different group of immigrants, public charge rule, student visa restrictions. I could go on and on.

It's hard to figure out as we read these headlines what the implications are, which will stand up in the court and what the social and economic impacts might be. Meanwhile, Congress hasn't passed major reform on immigration for decades, which means a lot of the power lies in the executive branch. My colleague, Wendy Edelberg, who you'll meet later, and I, along with Stan Veuger released a report this morning looking at our estimates of the number of people on net that came to the US in 2025. We could have a, the slide, it'll pop up in a moment, I hope. Our key finding, which you can learn more about on the Brookings website, is that migration was negative in 2025 on net, and this is the first time this has happened in decades. Maybe ever.

We don't have recorded net migration flows annually. Going back that far, what you can see on this slide if you focus on that middle blue line, is that net immigration rebounded from COVID in 2021, it was around a million, which means a million people came relative to the number of people that left. And that was pretty typical if we compare to 2019 and before. But in the subsequent years, we had massive inflows exceeding 3 million in 2023. Those slowed down in 24 and of course have sharply declined in 2025. And that sharp decline is the major reason that we now see negative net migration. In addition, we've had more outflows than usual in part driven by enforcement activity directly. And we believe also in part, driven by voluntary responses to the environment right now.

There's a fair amount of uncertainty in these numbers given slowdown in data availability that we've seen this year and the general difficulty with measuring immigration. But this is really a pretty dramatic moment where we have negative net migration. We believe we'll talk more about this in the expert panel that will be joining us shortly.

First, though, we are honored to be joined by representative María Salazar, Republican representative for the 27th District of Florida, where she has served since 2021. We are especially grateful to have her here because she has been a leader in the cause of

bipartisan immigration reform. And she's gonna talk more about that today. Representative Salazar introduced along with a fellow congresswoman, the Bipartisan Dignity Act, and reintroduced it last year. And this act includes several important components, including an increased enforcement and border security, a pathway to legal status for many undocumented immigrants, as well as legal immigration reform.

And this package is designed to appeal to a broad group of lawmakers and constituents. Today, the congresswoman will be joined in a fireside chat by Brookings scholar Marcela Escobari. Marcela has had a wide-ranging career in international affairs. She was the executive director of Harvard's Center for International Development and in 2021 through 2024 was the assistant administrator for USAID Bureau on Latin America and the Caribbean. She recently released a report as well called "Migration Under Pressure," about what lessons we can learn from the response to migration during the Biden era. And I encourage you to check that out. For now, though, please join me in welcoming Congresswoman Salazar and Marcela Escobari to the stage for fireside chat.

ESCOBARI: Okay. Thank you all of you. Thank you so much for joining us, Congresswoman Salazar.

SALAZAR: My pleasure.

ESCOBARI: I think that last time we saw each other, I was testifying in front of the subcommittee for Western Hemisphere, which you chair right? This is a bit more comfortable.

SALAZAR: Thank you. I'm sure it is.

ESCOBARI: So, you have been, as Sarah mentioned, a long-time champion for immigration reform. And the urgency for immigration reform mounts. And the tragedy in Minneapolis, I think has put that front and center. And through that time, you have stayed firm in arguing for a balanced approach, one that incorporates enforcement along with a legal basis for many migrants to be able to contribute to American communities. What is the receptivity of such an approach in Congress today? And can you tell us specifically about the Dignity Act?

SALAZAR: Of course.

ESCOBARI: And its prospects in Congress?

SALAZAR: And thank you very much to Marcela and to the Brookings Institute for putting together this event, such an important and intelligent place, thinking important topics. So, I salute you, I congratulate you, and I really mean it from the bottom of my heart's gratitude for being able to have a platform where we can explain to the country both parties, the

independence, everybody, the Americans, how important immigration is, and as you said, even now, more than ever.

I wrote something called the Dignity Act, which is the piece of legislation, is the only piece of legislation in the United States Congress right now, both houses, Senate and the House of Representatives. Because unfortunately, immigration is a very toxic topic and people are very afraid – people, meaning members of Congress, are very concerned and afraid to talk about it because that could harm their political career. That has nothing to do with the fact that for the last 40 years, we have not been able to put together an immigration reform that we needed. The immigration system in this country is completely broken, whether it's the legal or the illegal, E-Verify, everything that has to do with immigration. I just had the idea of writing the Dignity Act.

And what does it basically say? It says is the art of the possible, which is politics, right? This hour in the United States Congress, under the Trump administration, we, the Republicans in charge, we can definitely pass a bill that says that if you have been here for more than five years, you meaning someone who came in illegally more than five years and you have not, have, not have not broken the law, you do not have a criminal record. And you may have American children, you may be working, you can come out of the shadows. You don't have to hide anymore and you'll apply. You will pay a fine of \$7,000 over the next seven years. You'll have to then give 1% of your salaries to the treasury.

We're gonna then create two pots of money so the taxpayers will not have to pay for the dignity legislation. Very, point now that it will be zero to the taxpayers, then you will E-Verify will be mandatory. The border security will continue, will be codified into law border that is secured right now. And then you are gonna be able to, as the legal, the undocumented, you will be able to go home for Christmas, go your mom, be able to buy home, come back, work, pay the fine and the 1% and then you're able to buy a house, credit card and contribute with within the economy and become a customer and become someone that consumes and at the same time produces. Why do I think this is important? This bill is important because of three reasons. It's national security is the economy and is immigration, national security. We need to know who your neighbor is. 'cause we don't want, do we know we don't and we don't want the MS13s and we don't want we do not want illegals who are murderers. Now, we do not want to do that. Those need to leave. But the ones who do not have a criminal record should be protected because they are helping our economy. So, get to know your neighbor.

Number two, the economy. And I'll promise I'll shut up because then, I won't let you speak. The economy. We have three sectors, construction, hospitality, and agricultural. And healthcare and the butcheries and those slaughterhouses and the greenhouses and everything that has to do with intense labor. Who is going to clean the toilets and who's

gonna go pick up the jalapeno peppers or the tomatoes in Miami? Who is going to do that? The Americans, of course, there's some natives could do that, but some, most Americans choose not to participate in those sectors. That's the economy. If we wanna continue working and growing as the economy and the BB, all the money that we're pouring into the economy, someone has to work. That's national security. And then at the end, immigration, let's create modern laws in a modern time. That's basically the dignity legislation.

ESCOBARI: We'll get a chance to talk a bit about the economic impact, 'cause I think that is huge, but let's move to a topic, the topic of interior enforcement.

SALAZAR: Okay.

ESCOBARI: For immigration policy affects South Florida disproportionately, right? With over 40% of residents in Miami-Dade born outside of the U.S. That's compared to 14% in the rest of the country. One in two identify as Latinos, and there's over a million unauthorized migrants that reside in Florida, of which more than 70% work. Given this population, how is migration enforcement playing out on the ground in South Florida? How is it affecting communities in your --?

SALAZAR: In my community? District 27, the heart of the city of Miami, where you have the Venezuelans and the Central Americans and the Mexicans. I have 17 different nationalities. First generation, Cuban American, born in Miami. My parents are political refugees. I'm the founder of Univision, one of the most important radio television stations in the country. So, I know exactly who I'm talking about. Not necessarily people that live in my district, but I'm talking about the whole country. The Mexicans in the Southwest, the Puerto Ricans and the Dominicans and the Jamaicans in the Northeast, we're talking about the whole nation is full of people that, that are going to be benefiting from this legislation.

The impact. Kristi Noem, the head of Homeland Security, said that Congress needs to change the laws. ICE is following instructions. ICE is following directives. We need to change those. We need to change legislation so then ICE and then the president will be able to say, now we have a new set of laws. That's why we need to concentrate in Congress and writing new legislation so we can change not only the narrative—reality. That's why I am doing this.

And that, I, but I'm gonna tell you something. I am sure that President Trump, who dared to do what he did with Maduro, which was glorious, and who now is sending the message to Iran and who did what he did in the Middle East, he is a guy that comes from construction and hospitality. He knows that we need those hands. So, I think in the very near future during this year, we will see movement, hopefully will be the Dignity Act, but something will

happen with immigration. No doubt that he's gonna be the guy who's going to be for immigration what Lincoln was for slavery and Reagan was for communism.

ESCOBARI: On this issue of interior enforcement, one issue that is discretionary is who we're going after. And as 70% of people currently detained by ICE have no criminal records. Do you think that interior enforcement should be focused on those with criminal records?

SALAZAR: I have said it clearly. The president said that he's gonna go after the bad embrace. The bad are the bad guys with papers or without papers. Wanna get them out the murderers, the rapists. Of course. No, we need to hone in on and dedicate the money that we allocated through the BBB on ICE to go look for those people. I do not believe or agree that it's good for anybody to go after the cleaning lady just because she has been an illegal for the last 22 years. Someone gave her a job. Someone gave her a job. That's why she stayed. Why don't we have E verify is mandatory. Reality is that there are no saints and either party. The Dems and the Republicans and the independents, let's all come together. Let's be realistic. Let's be transparent.

Let's put an end to this story and let's do the best we can. Which is to give dignity. I'm not talking about citizenship, I'm not talking about a path to citizenship, because that has been the biggest hurdle that this community has had for the last 25 years. Give them dignity, a dignified life in the promised land, for them to be able to go home for Christmas and come back and I serve them. I speak their language. And if you go to Pedro or Tope and you say, Hey, pep, look, I'm gonna give you dignity. It's called a dignity status. How long you been? I've been on legal for 22 years. Good. So, what about if I can let you come out of the shadows? You can put your money in a bank account and have a little visa credit card and buy car. And I give you the dignity, and you'll never be able to be, American. No problem. No problem. Yes. I want it. Wait, where do I sign? That's what I'm doing.

ESCOBARI: And let's go to the topic of economics. You, the economic literature reinforces what you've often said that this is not a fixed pie. That migrants who work here actually expand the economy. They complement American workers and create jobs for native workers. How is the current policy affecting, your district, your state that relies on these labor-intensive industries. What does it mean when people can't go to work? Are too afraid to take care...

SALAZAR: Also, it distorts the market because then the guy who owns the construction company knows that he can pay Pepe less than he can pay John. And that's not good either because John then feels that he has been displaced by an immigrant. No. Now we're gonna, we are gonna create a level playing field where everybody, pe, Muhammad, everybody is

gonna make the same amount of money, whatever the marketplace pays for that job. And then everyone can show up Monday morning with no fear, and everyone will have a credit. A driver's license.

Just, it regulates everything. And according to your stats, this type of program will create trillions of dollars in economic growth. If we wanna continue being the number one country in the world, we should, because we do have good principles. We should have a very strong economy. And these people that I am I, that I wanna bring out of the shadows will contribute to that reality. And so, answering your question it's such common sense to be able to bring some peace and tranquility to the marketplace so the marketplace can do its best.

ESCOBARI: No. Makes sense.

SALAZAR: And thank you for putting together those numbers that we have used extensively.

ESCOBARI: No. And the numbers are compelling. I think it was Florida Policy Institute estimated of the current enforcement law would cost Florida like \$12 billion. How does the Dignity Act specifically? Either both confronts that and make sure that this discuss doesn't happen given the current enforcement laws in Florida.

SALAZAR: That's it. That's why we are talking to the White House, and I'm talking to Mike Johnson who's been very receptive. The GOP, excuse me, the GOP conference understands my colleagues. My 218 colleagues right now in the United States Congress, get it. It's just the politics always gets on the way because there are groups out there, not Brookings groups out there saying, oh, you are in favor of amnesty. What does that mean? What don't we define what amnesty means? For me, amnesty is what they have right now, that the illegals or the undocumented do not pay for schools, for roads or for hospitals.

They don't. But under the dignity, they're gonna come out of the shadows, they're gonna have the dignity status, and they will have to pay for their own health insurance. All right? And they, no, no federal programs. Neither do they really have them right now, because very few, if any, the overwhelming majority of the legals do not have Medicare and Medicaid Social Security. They don't have any programs. They don't even have a bank account where they can deposit whatever they earn. So right there it's it the White House, we're working with them and we are explaining that this is good for everybody, including Florida, but I'm thinking Florida and the whole nation.

ESCOBARI: And let's move a little bit into foreign policy. As Latin American countries absorbed the bulk of the Venezuelan crisis. Over 80% of the Venezuelans who were displaced ended up in a few countries, and they provided legal status to over 4.5 million

migrants. Those migrants got to restart their lives, and that also meant that they didn't they didn't often continue their journey Here. You have been a proponent forever of a very robust relationship with Latin America. What should be our relationship when it comes to migration? What should we be asking the region for? How should we be collaborating?

SALAZAR: Listen, now that's a great question. If you have solid countries with good governance, and you have good governments who are allies of the United States, no one will want to leave. What Venezuela wanted to leave Venezuela. What Hondurans, who wants to leave their country, everyone wants to be able to raise their children at home, is just the economic situation. I've introduced now that you say that I've introduced the Americas Act. Which is another piece of legislation thanks to Senator Cassidy from Louisiana.

He was the one who put it together, which basically what we're saying to Latin America is, why don't you behave little corruption, good governance, cleanliness and do not steal the elections, behave well when it comes to politics. And then you will be able to join us in the USMCA and be part, a business partner of the United States. That's what I think that we should start fostering. Trump is thinking about that, but right now with what happened with Venezuela, I think that we are we're experiencing like a new business model, a new blueprint, a groundbreaking new model of foreign policy when it comes to the Western hemisphere, where you stabilize, where you restore, and where you transition.

And it's a great message. I think it's gonna be a very good message for other countries that. Do have democracy, but whomever is in charge is not behaving really well and it's not serving the people. You know what that mean? It's not serving the people. I think everyone is gonna clean up their game because they know that the United States is watching and wants them to behave well when it comes to good governance. So, I think that we are we're at the beginning of a very interesting era for the Western Hemisphere. Thank God.

ESCOBARI: Let me ask a question that I know has come through many of our online viewers, which is your bill has actually gained a lot of momentum. It has 41 co-sponsors. Yet things seem very difficult in Congress. What is the path toward this becoming law? What do you foresee in 2026? What's your call to action to everyone in congress, including your colleagues, Republican colleagues?

SALAZAR: President Trump. Trump will see. That this is needed. He tweeted it a few hours ago, I think, couple of days ago. He said to in that long, extensive interview that he gave to the New York Times, I'm not sure if he the audience has realized that that one of the quotes he gave to the journalist was that he knew that there was a need for comprehensive immigration reform and that he was open to it and that he was gonna work with the Dems. Yes, that's exactly what we're waiting for. So, I'm very optimistic. Trump is an intelligent guy.

He's a business guy. Regardless of what anybody thinks of what's happening at the White House, let's look at the results. Let's look at what he can do. And one of the things he can definitely change is the course of the immigration history that we have lived for the last 40 years.

I'm very optimistic. And then, and then we have this bill, which it's, and I have to give all the credit to Veronica Escobar from Texas, who has been my co-sponsor. She has been very brave. Within her party, within the Democratic party, she has encountered some harsh criticism because it does not include path to citizenship. So, what. It's, it gives a new hope to those people who right now are dying of fear, of anxiety and who cannot contribute to the American economy. I, kudos and my deepest appreciation to Veronica Escobar.

ESCOBARI: For all of our sake we're glad that somebody with your perseverance is on this case and continuing to post this.

SALAZAR: Hey, I wasn't, I was a journalist, remember?

ESCOBARI: I know we're gonna open it up, but I wanted to ask one last question or just ask you to give a message to the Latino community which, the polling numbers show that that people are living in fear. And I know this is something that is that is personal for you and I.

SALAZAR: It is.

ESCOBARI: And they're not going to church. They're not going to work. The level of absenteeism across Latino children in the state has skyrocketed. What is your message to them? And what does dignity mean for this community?

SALAZAR: Oh, so my message to them is that I feel them, and that's exactly why I am doing this because I know that there are millions and millions of people that I do not know, and maybe they do not know that the Dignity Law was written, but that I feel them and I know that no human being should live with no criminal record, with no bad intentions, only with good intentions to, to have a better life for themselves and for their American children who their circumstances push them to have to come illegally, which they should have not done, but it, that it is what it is, that they are contributing to one of the sectors that I mentioned, that I get them, and that there is hope, that I know that they're praying to the same God that we all pray to, and that he is listening and that I will not stop. Until I see that my Republican party has understood that this is the right thing to do, this is the Christian thing to do, this is the American thing to do regardless of political affiliation. This is who we are, a good nation. So, we got a good, do dignifying things for the people who live here on this territory. That's my message.

ESCOBARI: Thank you, Congresswoman. Of course. Let's open it up to questions. Let's start with folks in the audience. Maybe let's get a couple questions so you get to choose what you like.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I'm David Smith of the Guardian. I'm interested, what do you think the US approach to Venezuela should be in the medium to long term? Noting that some oil companies have already said it's a difficult place for them to operate. And I wonder also, what do you make of President Trump's threats to Cuba and Columbia as well?

SALAZAR: Venezuela, I think the Venezuelans are very blessed and lucky people by having a lady by the name of María Corina Machado. She earned it. She proofed it. She was living in a tunnel for 60 months. I know it because I would talk to her often. She was the one who organized, this is the empirical evidence. It's not that I like her, I don't, it's that she organized the opposition against all odds. She was able to prove to the international community that they had won the election, 70 to 30. Maybe more.

She produced the tallies, and that's why she has the respect of the international unity, and that's why she won the Nobel Peace Prize. And thank God that the White House is going to be everything indicates that we, she's gonna be visiting our President within the next very few days. Karina, it can definitely lead that country. And she, she was in Venezuela up until a few days ago. I think that Trump did the right thing. It was about time for a president to do that, Republican and Democrat. In the last two since Ronald Reagan, we had not seen such an action, the right step to take and take out someone who was not the legitimate president, someone who had stolen the election, that had violated all those engagements and the commitments that he made to the Biden administration under the Barbado Accord.

So, I have to only applaud the President and Marco Rubio, who I proudly say that he's my constituent. 'cause we all come from the same neighborhood, knows very well what we're doing. And I love this stabilized recovery. And then transition, I think is a new blueprint, which I said previously. The new blueprints that we have created that the Trump administration has created for vis-a-vis Latin America. Why not? Let's welcome that idea.

ESCOBARI: Okay. And then we'll take that, both questions at the same time.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thanks. I'm a congressional journalist that covers immigration and I've written a couple of books about immigration law, how it evolved, and immigration law. I think almost all Americans agree that we can't have open borders, that we have to have law saying who can come in, who can't, and how is that gonna be enforced? It seems like the conversation, even as you're talking today, is all about letting people in, but you're ...

SALAZAR: Nope.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I don't hear the enforcement side.

SALAZAR: I will tell you right now, and I'm so sorry if I did not, sorry. If I did not stress that enough. I am very sorry if I did not stress enough. The fact that we cannot have open borders, that the Trump administration has closed the border and we have written the codification of that secure border. In the Dignity Act, the first thing we need to do is to make sure that future administrations will continue enforcing a very secured board. That's the first thing. But once that is done, which is what we have done already, right? We codify that meaning that for year after year, we're going to invest money and resources in order to keep the Southern border closed or very tight and just make sure that whoever comes in, we know about, okay?

But then once that is done, then we have to look in, which is what I'm saying. Then you look back and say, who is here? That's the Dignity Act and this is a one-shot deal. The undocumented have a year to come out of the shadows and say, I have been here for more than 7, 10, 15. This is who I am. Here's where I live. I do not have a criminal record. I have been picking up the jalapenos. I've been cleaning the toilet. Whatever you have been doing, and then you can apply for the dignity status, one shot deal. Now, future administrations need to make sure that border is still secured. Where we have the towers and the infrared cameras, and the drones and the CVP, anything and everything the marketplace produces in technology.

In order to secure the border, we need to buy that. And that, but then one of the things that right now that most people do not know is that if a law, the dignity, or any other does not pass, then the border is secured by executive order. It comes 28, we may not be in the White House, and then what happens? There are no laws. So, we need to have a law passed by the United States Congress. Thank you.

ESCOBARI: Final question in the back.

SALAZAR: I wrote it, now it's up to them to pass.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Congresswoman I'm trouble and question the ability of us to be the fair judge of what's happening in other countries. A week ago, today we celebrated five years since January 6th when our current president refused to accept the results of the election and said the election was stolen and filed about 50 lawsuits and no judge would support his claim. And now he's going to be able to determine whether or not somebody in another country in South America behaved properly. Isn't that kind of hypocritical?

SALAZAR: Hey, I can thank you for your question. I do believe that the Trump administration had a very strong legal framework and a very strong legal case to take

Maduro out. He was indicted in 2020. He was part of the list of transnational criminal organization members. He was, he stole the election, or he was he signed an agreement, I mentioned the Barbados agreement with the Biden administration in order to respect the results of the presidential election of July of 24. And he did not. On top of that, he was we proved that he was one of the heads who along with Dios Daddo of the son's cartel. So, the White House had a very strong legal case.

Trump did the same thing that Obama did that Bush did that Reagan did in Granada. So, I don't have any problems with that. And right now, they have explained what they're gonna do. They, like I said, they're going to take the oxygen away, which is oil. They're going to use that money in order to rebuild some of the civil society and some of the democratic institutions, and then just turn it over to the Venezuelans. This happened in Cuba between 1898 and 1902. This happened in Panama, so it's nothing new just because the fact is that it's Trump it doesn't affect me. I'm just looking at the facts and how they're behaving. And so far, they are they're airtight when it comes to the legality.

ESCOBARI: Thank you, congresswoman, for your time and your work.

SALAZAR: Of course, thanks to all of you as well, and for the opportunity. Okay.

WATSON: All right, we're ready to transition. We can see, oh, there he is. Okay, good. I was gonna say, we can see Eduardo, but I'm not sure the audience can, but now they're able to. So, I'm delighted now to transition to our Panel of immigration experts. We have to my left here, David Bier. He's the Director of Immigration Studies at the Cato Institute which I would say is sometimes surprises people the way they approach immigration issues. So, he'll talk more about that, perhaps. Wendy Edelberg is my colleagues, Senior Fellow in Economic Studies here at Brookings, former Director of the Hamilton Project. Kristie De Peña is the Director of Immigration Policy at the Niskanen Center and Eduardo Porter joining us from Mexico City is an Economics and Business Journalist who has worked for the Washington Post, New York Times, and many other publications covering this issue.

So, I'm very grateful for all of them joining us today. I'm going to start with a question for each of them, and then we'll get into more of a conversation. I'm gonna start with David. So, I gave you the very simple task of telling us what's happened with immigration in 2025. That's obviously a big topic, so could you just highlight for us a few things that you think are particularly important for the audience to know about? Just what has happened and how should we be thinking about it?

BIER: Yeah, obviously we don't have a whole hour to discuss every policy change that the Trump administration has done, and even that wouldn't be sufficient to cover it at the start of the year. I made two predictions. One was that he would reduce legal entries more than

illegal entries and that two, he would create more illegal immigrants here in the United States by terminating people's status than he would deport. And both of those predictions have turned out to be accurate. If you look at the border he has, it's the quietest border we've had since the 1960s. He got there by essentially banning all asylum into the United States, which was of debatable legality. And that's still being litigated in the courts, whether he's gonna be able to continue to adopt that policy going forward.

But at the same time that he did that securing the border and eliminating the legal immigration, he also terminated asylum for legal entries at the border using the CCB P one phone app. He also banned parole sponsorship programs started by the Biden administration. And in addition to those he eliminated on day one, the refugee program, which had was projected to resettle about 125,000 people into the United States over the next year. And by the end of the year, he had adopted a travel ban or immigration ban that would affect one in five legal immigrants to the United States essentially preventing them from immigrating to the United States, including spouses and minor children of US citizens would be subject to this ban if they were from one of these targeted countries.

And he also, in addition to all of this eliminated the diversity EVs and lottery this year, which is another 55,000 green cards being eliminated through executive action. If you look in the interior, what has he done when it comes to deportations? There's about 300,000 or so deportations so far this year. You compare that to the number of people who lost their status, their legal, temporary protected status parole status, and otherwise we're over 2 million people have had their temporary status eliminated by this administration.

They were in a legal lawful status at the start of this year, and now they are not. And so, it is a dramatic change in policy from that standpoint. Obviously, there's been a lot of chaos in the streets, a lot of arrests taking place, a lot of things that, catch the attention of the media. But that's the broad strokes of what has actually happened by the numbers. And it's been a very strict policy at the border when it comes to legal and illegal immigration, as well as in the interior of the United States when it comes to people who want to have status here and work legally.

WATSON: Thank you. We'll come back and ask you some more questions about that, but first I wanna turn to Wendy. Wendy, you and I have worked on trying to understand the economic implications of these changes. As I mentioned in the intro, we are projecting that 2025 had net negative migration. So, walk us through how we think about the economics of that. What does that mean for the macro economy?

EDELBERG: The changes with regards to the labor market are profound because immigration is one of the primary reasons why we have labor sup labor supply growth in the

United States. And so, if you go from what was pretty strong immigration. On net in 2024 to what we project, what we estimate for 2025 of negative net migration. You're gonna have a massive swing in what's happening to labor supply in 2024 versus what's happening to labor supply in 2025. And the way to think about that for what it means for the employment numbers, when open your computer on the morning of the employment report and see what's happening with job growth from month to month, the way to think about that is that labor supply just what's happening because of demographics and not because people are responding to business cycle effects, like the labor market looks strong or the labor market feels weak, and people responding to that.

Just regular old demographics, people turning 18, wanting a job, people getting outta college, wanting a job. Your life changing because your kids got older and now, you're gonna go into the labor force. All those sorts of. Day in and day out demographic issues. Think of that as a speed limit on employment growth. You can drive under the speed limit, you can drive over the speed limit, but the speed limit itself is, supposed to create like a sustainable pace of traffic. So, it's a little bit similar to that. And what we estimate is that limit, that break even pace of employment growth in 2024 was quite strong in 2025, fell to maybe somewhere in the ballpark of 30,000 a month toward the end of the year.

Those are really weak numbers compared to numbers that we as Americans are used to. And then assuming we continue on with this immigration policy in 2026, there's a decent chance that we will see negative employment growth. Month in and month out, even with a low unemployment rate. So, we will open our computers. I keep wanting to say open the newspapers. There's probably nobody in this room that actually is doing that on the morning of the employment report. So, we'll open our computers. We'll see that the unemployment rate is maybe still around 4.5%, which is pretty low by historical standards and maybe monthly job growth was negative 10,000 again.

And we will have to reconcile those two facts. We basically are creating a shrinking supply of labor. Now, it also this also has effects for the real economy. This has effects for consumer spending. This has effects for GDP there, the numbers are gonna seem more modest. We're gonna be not seeing numbers that we're more used to. Because as much as immigration is the primary reason we have labor supply growth, it's not the primary reason we have GDP growth. We have GDP growth for lots of reasons. But that said. We estimate that GDP growth was knocked down some in 2025 and it will be knocked down again in 2026. Some of the, one of the ways that you can think about that happening is just because immigrants in the United States spend money, they spend money on goods and services that ends up as GDP growth.

They're making money in their jobs; they're spending the vast majority of that money on goods and services. So, you're seeing less GDP in a way that you can say they're just supplying less, but you also just consistently, this is how an economy works. So seeing less GDP in terms of less consumer spending. Those aren't, I don't wanna add those two things together. They just go together consistently. Then above and beyond that, we think that the enforcement environment is having a chilling effect on spending among immigrants. So that's a knock-on effect, and that affected GDP growth in 2025. And it continues to affect GDP growth in 2026.

And these numbers are not small. So, if you think about like consumer spending, we're talking about effects of maybe between \$40 billion and \$60 billion in 2025 in terms of reductions in consumer spending. And then from 25 to 26, another reduction of let's say 10 to 40 billion. So, when you hear about Walmart knocking down its revenue numbers, when you hear about McDonald's complaining about lower revenue, Albertsons, the grocery store chain just complained about lower revenue from its stores. I think a lot of this is actually just less spending by immigrants.

WATSON: Thank you. All right, we'll turn to Kristie next. I forgot to turn my page here. A lot of what we have been talking about and seeing today has to do with the executive branch. They're the ones driving a lot of the policy in this space as it has always been the case. Could you talk about other actors that are playing an important role or could be playing an important role, Congress being an obvious one, the courts perhaps, other ways that the general populace can be shaping immigration policy?

DE PEÑA: Sure, absolutely. So, I think that the reason that, that so many people have heard about Congresswoman Salazar and Escobar's Bill is because it is very unique these days. Congress hasn't been especially active in the last couple of years. Early on in the Trump administration, Congress passed the first immigration only bill called the Lake and Riley Act. It had bipartisan support and basically the Lake and Riley Act just changed how we mandated detention without bond for non-citizens who are charged and arrested. But prior to that, there really hasn't been anything passed on immigration by Congress in a long time. And in part that's because this executive really has had exceptional control over the Republican Congress since President Trump's inauguration. The other big action that we've seen come from Congress has been of course, the one big beautiful bill that everyone is probably relatively familiar with.

And in that bill we passed about \$170 billion worth of money for immigration enforcement, which is about five times. The annual combined budgets of ICE and CBP that we have seen in the past several years. Other than that, Congress really hasn't been especially active on immigration. So much of what we have seen comes from the administration and MPI put out

a couple of great numbers this morning that I'm gonna cite very quickly and put some of David's remarks into context. So, Trump has signed 38 executive orders related to immigration since he began that accounts for about 17% of the total 225 orders that he has signed so far. But I think the more important number is that MPI is estimating that the Trump administration in the first year of his second term, took more than 500 actions on immigration.

So that comes in the form of policy guidance or presidential proclamations. But all of that is to say that this executive has been extraordinarily active on immigration, and it's made only that much more extraordinary by the fact that Congress really hasn't been playing much of a role at all. So, we expect to some extent, Congress to step in and perhaps moderate this administration. There are lots of Republicans, as the Congresswoman mentioned, that are unhappy with some of the outcomes of the, this administration's approach to immigration and yet we really haven't seen too much. But I do think that bills like the Dignity Act represent three broader key points that I think are worth flagging on Congress.

One is that there is recognition across party lines that this current administration isn't, and our current rules aren't working the way that most American want them to work. So, there are lots of Americans that voted for President Trump that wanted to close off the border. They wanted more control over the border. They wanted us to deport criminals in America. But what they are seeing now especially some of the changes to legal immigration and the economic impacts they're in are not what they voted for on Trump. So, there is a little bit of metering going on. I think the second piece is that even when an enactment of a bill like this is uncertain it is good that Congress is getting involved here because their constituents want answers to some of these questions.

I think the American public is probably more informed about immigration than they ever have been in the past. And so, what that means is that when a lot of these folks are going back to their districts in preparation for the midterms, which feel like a long ways away, but we know are never that far away. They're gonna want answers to some of these really important questions. And I think to, to Wendy and Tara's point, we are on the precipice of a lot of kind of different potential tipping points as we see economic impacts to, of some of these changes, civil impacts to some of these changes and certainly kind of social impacts as people are potentially rethinking what they supported.

I think the other moderating influence potentially on this administration is of course the Supreme Court. And we could go through lots of the things that the Supreme Court has done to date. Most of it has been through emergency orders. Dave touched on a couple of these a little bit, but I think it's worth noting that there are a couple of really big cases that we are

anticipating out of the Supreme Court that could have really remarkable moderating impacts on this administration.

The first is on recalibrating executive power. In the tariff case, the Supreme Court has a decision to make about the extent of President Trump's authority on tariffs. The other is the Trump versus Slaughter case, which is a separation of powers dispute about whether Congress can insulate folks from the firings that I'm sure that you are all very aware of.

But I think arguably one of the most important decisions that is gonna come out of this Supreme Court. It is gonna be in response to one of President Trump's first executive orders. This is one of the ones that came out on Inauguration day that seeks to redefine who can acquire us citizenship by birth. Everybody calls this the birthright citizenship case. And whether that's a violation of the citizenship clause of the 14th Amendment and the INA, this is a big case. It has far reaching impacts. We did hear early on all the lower courts where this issue has come in front of so far have blocked the policy.

But we did hear an or oral arguments in May of last year on a nationwide injunction case. A lot of Supreme Court justices who were very skeptical about whether or not, we whether or not this EO is a violation of our constitution. So, this is a, these are very big cases, but as we all know, the courts are perhaps one of the biggest moderating influences that we have seen over many of the past administrations. And very curious to see what some of these decisions look like coming out in the next couple of months.

WATSON: Thank you for that. All right. And last but not least, we will turn to Eduardo. Eduardo, as Kristie mentioned, we a lot of voters were concerned about what was happening at the border in the previous administration. Voted for Trump probably because they wanted to see tighter borders. And we have seen those. Tighter borders manifest themselves, but also a lot of other action on immigration. So, could you talk a little bit about how the American public is responding to what they're seeing in immigration policy? And both at the border and in the interior?

PORTER: For sure. Thanks. Yes, as you well said, those chaotic scenes of migrants massing at the border too request asylum during the Biden administration in 2023. Were pretty critical, I think, to deliver Trump's victory in the presidential election. And the sharp drop in bordering counters with migrants, which in fact started in 2024, but have dropped continuously through this year and are roughly at zero now, is clearly a Trump win. He definitely can count that as a check mark on his side. But the problem is that the American public never bought into the other bit of the immigration package.

They did not buy into mass deportations. So, I think that there was a little bit of a bait and switch in the communications from Mr. Trump on this. He was offering during the presidential

campaign to get rid of the bad ombres as the representative Salazar said earlier, this was immigrant criminals. But then he was also saying that he was gonna get rid of like hundreds of thousands, if not millions of them through deportation. So, the way to do this is you inflate criminal rates amongst immigrants, and you forget to mention that. In fact, rates of crime amongst the foreign born are actually lower than they are amongst native born Americans.

And you can then say, okay, we're gonna go after a ton of people. And, as it turns out, that's not true. Most immigrants are not criminals. In fact, the number of criminals that are being deported, the share of criminals deported, is actually quite small. And so, he's had to go into, workplaces and schools and churches and send federal agents and even members of the National Guard into American cities to carry out this mass deportation policy. And I don't think voters signed in on that, signed onto that. I think that now that's why he's losing, he will continue to lose public support over the broad immigration strategy if these tactics continue. And here's a little some, a little polling data that I think supports this point.

When Trump was just elected in February, there's a poll. About on ICE's approval rating, and there was a plus 16 ice was a favor seen by favorable versus minus unfavorable. There was a plus 16 rate of approval for ICE by November. And November was of course before the kind of things that we've seen in Minneapolis in the last few days. The rate, the rating of approval for ICE had gone down to minus 14, so that's a pretty, pretty large, a pretty, pretty large swing. And you see this in other polls too. There's a Newark poll from the University of Chicago, which finds in December approval for immigration policy at 38%, down from 49% in March. There's another poll from the Pew Research Center in October that finds the majority of Americans think Trump is doing too much in departing immigrants. And this is and the share has been rising amongst Democrats and Republicans.

And you find, for instance, at 50% of them disapprove of Trump's immigration policies altogether versus an approval rate of only 39%. And I think that what's underlying this is that, in general, Americans are not opposed to immigration. Indeed, I think most Americans like it. The, what Americans were reacting to and what was what worked very well for Trump was the scenes at the border of enormous chaos as Venezuelans were turning themselves in. And I wanted to share with you guys a little a chart here, and hopefully I do this well. I hope you can see it. That I think makes the point that I that I want to make. If you look at, if you look at, that brown line there, that spikes up in around 2023, 2024.

WATSON: That's Eduardo. Unfortunately, we can't actually see it, so you might have to describe, oh, so there you go. Okay.

PORTER: So, you'll see that brown line at the top is people who want the level of immigration decreased. And the darker line at the bottom is the number of Americans who

wanted increased. And the dotted line in the middle is the one who wanted to remain at the present level. So, if you'll see as we saw these scenes on TV of Venezuelans, turning themselves in at the border seeking asylum in very large numbers, you see a spike in the number of Americans who want less immigration, who want the share of immigrants to decrease. But as the border controls seem to come under control, as those numbers came down to zero you see that drop back down to pretty much a trend line that has been pretty steady since the mid 1990s or even the early 1990s and where the share of Americans who want less immigration has been bumpy, but coming roughly down and the share of Americans who either wanted to be kept the same or want more immigration actually coming up.

And I think that is pretty much the center that's where the center of the American public has been for a very long time. There is of course, a hardcore of Ethnonationalist voters in the MAGA base for which immigrants do appear as an existential threat. They fear competition for jobs, or even more broadly, they're driven by a sense of kind of demographic siege, the fueled by this declining share of non-Hispanic whites in the population and the rising share of Hispanics.

But more broadly Americans are a poll after poll showing that they're pretty comfortable with immigration. In June 20 the poll of June of 2025, which we're looking at right now, says that 56% want immigrants at the immigration the same level or increase. The only year since 2005, where Gallup has found a majority who want less immigration was in 2023 when, when we were seeing these images of chaos at the border. Last June, 79% of Americans said immigration was a good thing. That's the highest level since at least June of 20 of 2001, which is the first point that I could find Gallup numbers for. And even say non-Hispanic whites, non-Hispanic whites are the least enthusiastic. If you break these numbers down by ethnicity.

Non-Hispanic whites are the least enthusiastic about immigration, but even they are not in favor of deporting all undocumented immigrants. 54% oppose deporting all undocumented immigrants in the June poll and only 44% oppose it. If you then, if you just ask people, are you satisfied with immigration today? You'll find 63% will say that they are dissatisfied. But a lot of those are dissatisfied because they want more of it. Only 45% are as satisfied because they want a decrease in immigration. So, at the end of the day, the story is I think, pretty. It's not complicated. The border created a great deal of anxiety and a sense and a backlash against immigration as a whole.

Once the border was, if you wanna call it solved, once the numbers, the encounters at the border came down very sharply, this problem went away. And Americans snapped back to their general position on immigration, which has roughly been pretty favorable. So that's I

think kinda like how this ends up working. And I think that this will ultimately hurt Trump if he continues with the policies, with the tactics that we're seeing in cities like Minneapolis.

WATSON: Thank you, Eduardo. If you stop sharing your screen now, I think we'll...

PORTER: Oh, yeah.

WATSON: We'll figure out how to do that in a second. While you're working on that I wanna open up a question to the group in general. And even though a lot of the conversation has been around the border and around enforcement, hopefully we can talk a little bit about legal immigration. This is something that's changed more than I expected this year.

We've seen declines in areas of student visas of green cards. We have one area that's. Seems to have not gone in the same direction as the H two A program, which is for agricultural workers. So, I'd love to hear some thoughts from the group about how this administration is thinking about legal immigration and what coming down the pike. And I'll start with you, David.

BIER: Yeah. Restricting legal immigration is a big part of the policy agenda, even if it's not part of the debate that you focus on in Congress and so on. But when you look at their agenda, like I said, they, they canceled the parole programs. They ended the refugee program almost entirely. They banned one in five legal immigrants from abroad from immigrating here. And every time there's a major event they add a new ban. So anytime there's a, an Afghan does something bad, we ban Afghans and not just Afghans we'll add some other groups in as well. And so, I fear that is setting a precedent going forward as whenever there's some, there's always gonna be some bad thing that happens from some country, from some by some deranged person.

And that's gonna be a justification for more and more restrictions. And the thing that we really can't even capture yet, because the data it isn't being released in a regular basis by this administration, is how much all of these administrative actions that just gum up the works for people who are applying have actually led to fewer people getting through the process. And if you see, if you look at what's happening at US Citizenship and Immigration Services, which is supposed to be all about adjudicating people's applications for benefits. That is, they've paused 20% of all the applicants for countries around the world. As well as if you look at the backlog, it's continuing to spiral out of control because they're just not processing these applications because of so many of the policy changes.

Every week there's a new policy that comes out. So, I think when I look at what's gonna happen over the next three years, they're just going to build on that record of restriction. And the biggest restriction that's coming is the public charge rule, which under the first

administration was effectively a ban on low-income immigrants from immigrating this time around their proposed regulation on it won't even give you any kind of understanding how they're gonna implement it. They just basically say, we're gonna leave it up to adjudicators to figure it out, and then we'll issue some, guidance about it. But the bottom line is they look at it as a way to ban low income. Immigrants, and we'll see even further restrictions for all countries and all types of immigrants as a result of that policy.

WATSON: Thank you, Kristie? Wendy?

DE PEÑA: Sure. I think David's exactly right. One of the things that is both frustrating but also incredibly revealing is that this administration is following a playbook that many folks have been talking about for a couple of years. My colleague in sitting back there, Cecilia Estro line wrote a piece on project 2025, which candidate Trump very desperately tried to distance himself in during the presidential campaign. But really it is a, a list of check boxes for this administration that demonstrates the path that they're walking down to end legal immigration. The difference between legal immigration and illegal immigration in many respects for this administration is a difference without a distinction.

But the goal is to really reduce overall numbers on immigration. And it is a playbook for exactly how I think some of these things are gonna move forward. And so far we have really seen them walk down those lists. It's really gonna be a question about whether or not the American people and Congress and maybe the courts say, oh, this is in fact, where we really want this administration to go. Or we don't really like some of the impacts of these policies and we are starting to look to Congress to moderate them.

WATSON: I'm gonna ask one more question before we open it up, which has to do with imagining the future. So, if we all look ahead and imagine that in 2028 there's an election and there's a centrist person elected from any party and they have a centrist immigration agenda and maybe a centrist bill passes in Congress what are the long run ramifications of what we're seeing right now? Assume we go back to some, something we can all think of as being typical or normal. Is this gonna be something that's a blip in history or is this likely to have long term ramifications? Eduardo, I'll turn to you for that as a starting point and then open it up.

PORTER: I don't think you can put the toothpaste back in the tube very easily, frankly. For one I don't think we're ever going to go back to the kind of policies that President Biden was speaking about when he first came into office. The idea of legalizing the undocumented population or being or having a more generous asylum policy. I suspect that, for instance, the trends on asylum policy might continue pretty much on the same trend line that Trump is leaving with us.

And also, because we're seeing similar things going on in Europe as well among asylum is under threat everywhere right now. And so, I do expect that the hard border is going to remain and that the policies are going to be very restrictive there. I could also imagine that as Representative Salazar was saying, like there's some more restricted policies and perhaps this is a good thing on against employers employing undocumented immigrants because that is the main draw for immigration. Now, in terms of interior enforcement, I do, it, this is a particularly blood thirsty administration and I would hope that somebody more centrist would like, at least not be, send out like these heavily armed military folks into the streets who, you know to detain people willy nilly. But I do think that the us it's gonna be very hard say even if a Democrat comes into office to come into, to return to the prior kinda like democratic playbook on, on immigration.

WATSON: Thanks. Wendy, I'll ask you, in terms of the economics, if we were to go back to more standard or typical levels of migration, what long run impacts, if any, do you think this moment will have?

EDELBERG: I think, oh, in, in terms of not putting, being able to put the toothpaste back in the tube, I think it's not going to be credible, I don't think, in 2028 that we promise to treat our immigrants well. And I think what that means is that we have a longer-term effect on how welcoming immigrants and more importantly, for this long-term effect, potential immigrants consider the United States to be. And so, what we've done is we've made, a potential immigrant, wherever they are, whatever age they are, wherever, part of life they're in, they're now not just thinking about going to school in the United States or taking that job in the United States.

They're thinking about maybe I actually wanna go to school in Canada or go to school in Europe. Or actually maybe I wanna take that job, in, in East Asia. And my guess is that sticks and that will have longer term productivity effects. There's a deep literature that shows that immigration in the United States is one of the many drivers of productivity growth in the United States. Now, I don't wanna overstate this. I think productivity growth, even with a lot less immigration and a, less immigration among, the fantastic entrepreneurs who are gonna create, the new thriving companies.

Productivity growth will still be what it's gonna be. For the most part, these effects are on the margin. And so, it's gonna be people like me and, people who are, even not yet in graduate school who are gonna tease out these effects on productivity growth. But they will most certainly be there. Thanks.

WATSON: You wanna add something, Dave?

BIER: I would just say that we passed the one big, beautiful bill. It's \$170 billion. They're hiring all these new agents. They've already doubled the size of immigration and customs enforcement, so it's gonna be a real question what is gonna happen to all these people when the funding runs out in 2029? Is there gonna be, that'll be a huge debate. And so, the goalposts have shifted so dramatically that it's gonna be hard to have the same debate we had before all this happened. And so, from my standpoint, when I look forward and I think about that debate, it's gonna be one side saying, yeah, end it. We don't want those people anymore. We want a completely different direction, immigration policy and the other side saying not only do we want those people, but we want actually even more people in exchange for doing some kind of deal.

And so, I think that's an area where it's gonna be difficult to have the same debate again once this buildup is complete. And if you look at the policies, he's shifted the goalposts when it comes to policy as well. So dramatically, racial profiling in the streets. Demographic profiling is now part of the Trump administration's immigration policy. And one side wants to ban it, and the other side wants to mandate it. And again, how are you gonna bring both sides together? It's gonna be very difficult to get to a bipartisan agreement when the policies keep shifting and the goalposts keep shifting., And of course, birthright citizenship is another example. Now we're debating not even immigration but what to do with people who were born here.

EDELBERG: Can I add one more thing, which is, in a lot of our conversations and in the conversation with the congresswoman we've very rightly and reasonably assumed that surely the border will stay closed. Perhaps, that was one thing that Trump has done that, that actually a lot of presidents before him have wanted to do. And we will continue on with that policy. I don't have a lot of clarity. Maybe you guys do, of all the factors that have gone into successfully closing the border, clearly there's more resources there.

So, there's now a higher chance of getting caught, but surely there's like still a, positive chance of getting through. It's a very large border over a very complicated terrain. And so, I wonder how much of the reduction in activity at the border is actually, because there's always two things to preventing illegal activity. There's the chance of getting caught, and then there's what happens to you if you do get caught. And I wonder if we are going to find ourselves in the next administration when somebody comes in and wants to be more moderate, digging into the details and realizing, oh, that second part was actually really important for how little activity there was at the border, and we can't really stomach that once we shine some light on it.

WATSON: Kristie, you wanna add in?

DE PEÑA: Sure. I'll take a different tact. Because I think I love the Eduardo's analogy about the toothpaste. I think the one thing that President Trump has done since 2015 is really diagnose some problems. With our immigration system, and we've long said, everybody has long said for decades that our system is broken. And that means a lot of different things to a lot of different people. But one of the things that we have seen is that our institutions, our agencies, even some of our processes do have policies and processes that are, that can be pretty hard to defend sometimes. And this is forcing a conversation about how we rebuild a system that is credible and that really works. Whether or not you know it had to come at the price that I think we're going to pay, it is a different calculus, but I think at the end of the day, if we had to look for a silver lining, it is that we are gonna have an opportunity, I think, to really rethink what the future of immigration looks like in a way that has not come across our desks since. Maybe the first INA was passed.

WATSON: Okay. I appreciate the note of optimism there.

DE PEÑA: I'm trying...

WATSON: You know, and Wendy, to your question, I think there's a third thing, which is the timing. And so, if you were choosing for when to migrate to the us this might not be the moment that you would choose.

EDELBERG: Completely agree.

WATSON: Yeah. Completely agree. Okay. On that let's open it up for questions. Please wait for the mic and we'll take a few questions before we respond.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thank you. Gerald Chandler here. Are any of you have an absolute number, numerical limit on immigration?

WATSON: We'll come back to that. Let's take a few questions from the group.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Wendell Primus Brookings Institution. Do you see Stephen Miller or President Trump endorsing the Dignity Act? I think the Dignity Act makes a lot of sense. But will Congress pass anything this year with respect to immigration?

WATSON: Thank you. We have one more up here, and then we'll turn to our experts.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: And Bill, sorry, my name's Raav. Building on that and thinking about Representative Salazar's built faith that Donald Trump will support the legislation and thinking about his comment in the campaign about stapling a green card to every high value degree compared to the way things are played and the administration, I still can't tell if the president is personally committed to the fanaticism of the agenda that's going on now, or if this is really the Miller agenda. And the president is going along with whoever he last spoke

to on the topic as he is want to do. I know that's very much a politics question, not a policy question, but it'd be interested to get you guys perspective.

WATSON: Okay, great. So, we had a question about who's really driving this immigration policy. Whether the Dignity Act can align with whoever that is. And do any of you wanna stake out an ideal number of immigrants to be coming to the US each year?

BIER: When I look at the numbers, if you look back at the early 20th century, late 19th century, we routinely had a level of legal permanent immigration above 1% of the US population. I think the lesson of immigration policy over the last 30 years is that we have a such a static system that, it's basically stuck in cement and it's really hard to get Congress to go and revisit it all the time. So, you wanna have a system that's flexible, that responds to changes in the economy, responds to changes in the needs of society.

Look, we're, our population is increased by 35% since 1990, nothing about the 1990 Immigration Act of 1990, which set our current caps. Has changed to reflect that larger population. Our economy is twice the size of what it was. Obviously, whole new industries have developed since 1990, so I would advocate that we should not have some kind of hard fixed number that is not based on any kind of economic reality. We need something that's a system that reflects the change in dynamism of our society.

WATSON: Eduardo, I see your hand.

PORTER: Yeah, I just, I don't know what the ideal number of immigrants is, but I can tell you that zero is definitely not it. The census has some population projections. The latest are from a couple of years ago, and I, there's zero immigration projection has the US, has the US population shrinking pretty fast. Shrinks by 6% by mid-century. It shrinks by 10% by 2060. And not only does the population shrink, we get really old. Today people over 65 are about one fifth of the population, but in a zero-immigration scenario, the share rises to about a quarter by mid-century and over one third by the end of the century. So, it's certainly above zero. And that is something that I think somebody should tell Steven Miller.

EDELBERG: I wanna wait I wanna take this on and just answer it differently, which is, I think there are absolutely economic implications to whatever we choose about immigration, but I think our level of immigration is largely a political choice. It's what kind of country we wanna be. So, Japan has very strict immigration policies, and Japan's population is shrinking. It's a going concern. It doesn't break the country. It's just a very different kind of country than the United States has been. So, there are economic implications, but I don't think a technocrat can answer that question. I can answer the question of what we should do. I think it's a political question.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Are you saying you're a technocrat?

EDELBERG: I am, at least, yes. Is that a trick question?

WATSON: Okay. Let's turn back to Steven Miller, who's really driving the bus. And how would a bill, like the Dignity Act or another comprehensive immigration reform get across the line in this environment?

DE PEÑA: I'm happy to weigh in on that. I think that it has long been the wisdom of many immigration folk in this town that if this was an issue that President Trump. Wants to lean in on that. He has an incredibly unique ability to get it done. He has credibility on this issue. He has a lot of control over the Republican party. A lot of even moderate Democrats listen to and respond to what he is saying on immigration and if this was something that he said he wanted to fix. Even in small steps, even if we're not talking about comprehensive immigration reform, I think that he is probably pretty uniquely situated to do it.

I think that is the right calculation by Congresswoman Salazar. Whether or not there are other people in the White House or there are other folks who are going to stand up and get in the way of that, I think is a question for how hard the president wants to lean in on it. He is the one that is in charge. He is listening not only to Steven Miller, but to his economic advisors, to his, political leaders who are telling him about what is gonna happen in the wake of some of these midterms. And I think all of those are gonna be really persuasive things for this president to listen to.

We haven't done anything in a long time though, so it's gonna take some real leadership amongst people in Congress who historically have been very afraid to touch this issue because it is incredibly toxic. We have seen many really good legislators fall to immigration in the past. So, it's gonna take a lot of bravery and a lot of drive. But I think that is again, why maybe this president is uniquely situated to move this through.

WATSON: Thanks. All right. In our last moment here, I'm gonna ask each of you to just spend 30 seconds telling us what you're focused on most for 2026. What you think is thing that we should all be watching. David, I'll start with you.

BIER: I think when it comes to enforcement policy in the United States the demographic profiling that we see in the streets is by far the most important policy change when it comes to interior enforcement. The arrest numbers are not something that order of magnitude different from what we saw under Biden or the first term, but the number of people who are having these types of interrogations with immigration enforcement agents on the streets. Is an order of magnitude greater. And it's, and if you look from just January until the end of the year, the number of people who were arrested on the streets didn't have a criminal record,

no final order of removal, no reason for an immigration agent to touch them is 10 times greater than it was at the beginning of the year.

And it's also 10 times greater than it was in 2017 under the first Trump administration. This is totally unprecedented what we're seeing, and as they add an additional 12,000 agents, more than doubling the number of agents in the field, this is gonna affect every community, every city, really, almost everyone in our country is gonna come in contact with this one way or the other. And so that's the debate that I see coming down over the next three years. Is this the country that we want to have is really the question here,

WATSON: Wendy.

EDELBERG: I will be very focused on the labor market and the report that we just put out focused on aggregate statistics and what we think will happen in aggregate to the economy, in the labor market, and hopefully you and I with Stan, who's hopefully watching we'll have time to dig into issues at a more sectoral level, geographic level to see what's happening. Not at an aggregate level, but community by community, sector by sector.

DE PEÑA: Thanks. I'll try to differentiate a little bit, although I think those were very important things to watch. I think it's very important to listen to what this administration is saying about immigration. This has gone beyond policy or economics, or even politics. The way this administration talks about immigration is much, much broader, and I think that means its implications are much, much broader. If we wanna really listen to this administration and trying to categorize what it means to be an American, what we want this country to look like, how we talk about this country as it relates to our sovereignty and our national security, and even our domestic security, is really important to pay attention to the way the administration talks about new people coming to America.

And how they're setting. How they're using some of these talking points as it relates to the rest of the world and how we are defining Americans. I think it is much more explicit than we've seen in the past, and it can tell us a lot about the root of what the purpose of a lot of these policies are, even if we don't see some of the impacts of it immediately.

WATSON: Eduardo, final word.

PORTER: You've covered the terrain fairly well, but I would add that I am very interested I in paying attention to how the politics of immigration change and shift as. What I expect the unpopularity of the measures that are being now put in place across, especially American cities. Clearly, it's seen on TV screens across country as the unpopularity of this things in, I expect this is going to cost Republicans in the midterms. The reaction, particularly of Latinos

who were very important for Trump's victory in 2024, they've gone, they are very much against what's going on by like margins of 70% to 20%.

And so, I expect this to have some kind of political repercussions, and I am assuming that given that, politicians are forward looking, there will be some, preemptive perhaps conversations or actions or changes in policy that might shift the direction of what we're seeing right now on immigration. But I'm not entirely certain about that, but it's what I would expect. I'm very interested in seeing how that plays.

WATSON: All right. So, I wanna thank all of our panelists for joining us today as well as Marcela and the congresswoman for having our fireside chat. And we hope to see you all again at Brookings soon.