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The Trump Effect: US Immigration Policy and Transit Migrants in Central America

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Executive Summary

This paper studies the effect of destination state immigration policy shifts on the behavior and perceptions of migrants in transit. We leverage a novel survey of over 40,000 migrants in transit through Central America between 2021 and 2025 to examine their behavioral and attitudinal responses to shifts in United States (US) immigration policy under the US administrations of Presidents Joseph Biden and Donald Trump. Our research examines how intentions among transit migrants heading northward—principally to the US—alter in response to a promised change in US border and immigration policies. We find that, after Trump's inauguration, migrant intentions to enter the US significantly subsided, along with northbound trajectories more broadly. However, migrants traveling with children and migrants moving for economic reasons were less deterred than others. As a result, the "Trump Effect" did not produce uniform deterrence but rather intensified the perception of risk among US-bound migrants.

Our research suggests that:

- Migrants are sensitive not only to restrictive policy, but to the threat of a restrictive and unwelcoming environment,;
- Even under the most restrictive policy conditions, a minority of migrants will continue with their journeys;
- Restrictive border policies in destination states will apply greater demographic pressure on the societies and economies of safe alternative destinations like Costa Rica;
- Mexico's appeal as an alternative destination for migrants may be contingent on the openness of the US Southern Border;
- Uncertainty about long-run policy effectiveness remains given the persistence of humanitarian and geopolitical risks that the US may not be able to control.

Keywords

Central America, transit migration, irregular, asylum, immigration policy

Introduction

In his 2025 inaugural address, US President Donald Trump announced that he planned to immediately fulfill several campaign promises about border security: "First, I will declare a national emergency at our southern border. All illegal entry will immediately be halted, and we will begin the process of returning millions and millions of criminal aliens back to the places from which they came. We will reinstate my 'Remain in Mexico' policy. I will end the practice of 'catch and release.' And I will send troops to the southern border to repel the disastrous invasion of our country."

Within mere months, these policy changes appear to have produced a remarkable effect, as migrant encounters along the US-Mexico border reached the lowest levels since 1970 (CBP 2025; Montoya-Galvez 2025; White House 2025). An administration appointee and other commentators attributed the swift decline to a "Trump Effect" (Chishti and Bolter 2020; Homan 2025; Schier and Eberly, 2022).

Amidst the instability of the previous decade, the US Southern border had seen such sharp swings before. In the early days of the first Trump administration, US Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) reported significantly lower apprehension numbers along the US-Mexico border—which analysts similarly attributed to

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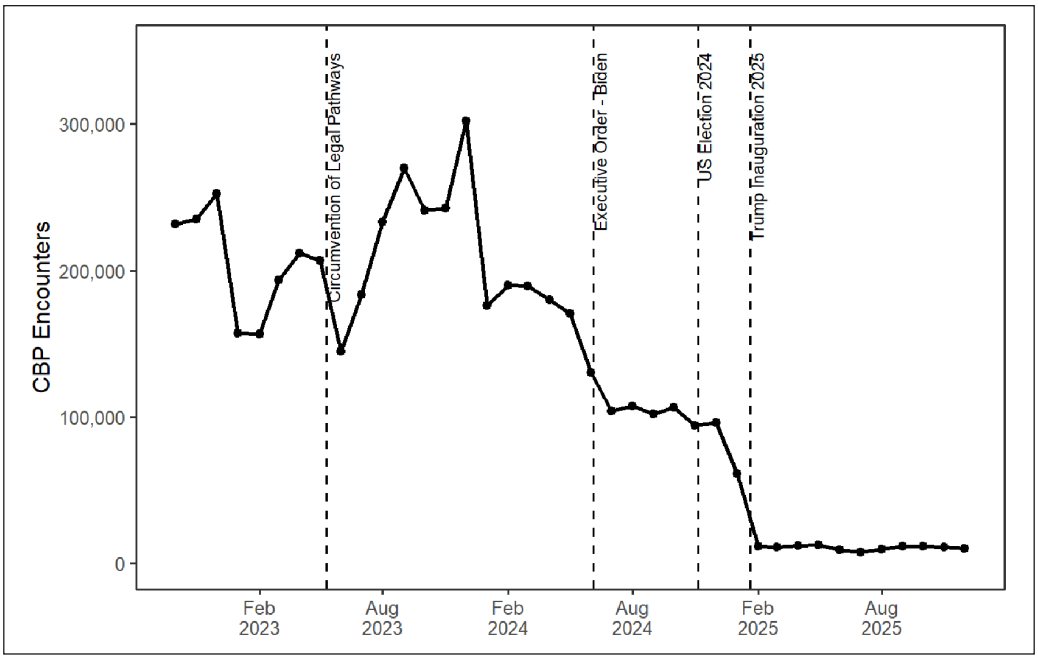


Figure 1. CBP US Southern Border Encounters per Month.
Note. The lines show monthly number of encounters by CBP. Labeled vertical dotted lines indicate the beginning of each US policy period.

President Trump's border control rhetoric—only for irregular migrant encounters to rebound to previous levels months later. In January 2019, President Trump created the "Remain in Mexico" policy, which required asylum seekers to wait in Mexico until their asylum appointment dates (DHS 2019; H.R.273. 2025). Again, while migrant encounters initially decreased, they returned to previous levels months later (CBP 2019) and persisted despite the Trump administration's pandemic-era enforcement of Title 42 public health restrictions starting in 2020 (American Immigration Council 2022; Chishti et al. 2024a).

Migrant encounter trends began to change under the Biden administration *(See* Figure 1). In 2021, the US Southern border experienced a tremendous spike in irregular migrant crossings, resulting in 1.6 million apprehensions. But in 2023, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) enacted the Circumvention of Legal Pathways rule change to replace Title 42 restrictions. The rule change swiftly returned migrants without valid immigration claims and encouraged prospective entrants to utilize safer, lawful pathways (DHS 2023). The following year, President Biden signed an executive order that triggered limitations on asylum applications upon reaching a seven-day average 2,500 irregular encounters (White House 2024). Combined with greater cooperation with Mexican authorities, these restrictive policy measures reduced irregular migrant crossings into the US by over 40 percent and 60 percent respectively in advance of the second Trump administration's inauguration (Chishti et al. 2024b; DHS 2023; Gooding 2025).

We know little about the mechanics of how destination state policies and political rhetoric affect the migrant perspectives and behavior underpinning flow numbers (Boucher and Gest 2018; Gest and Boucher 2021). Research primarily focuses on conditions and factors that attract migrants to certain destinations, giving more attention to prospective migrants and less to the influences that compel migrants in transit to return to their countries of origin or otherwise alter their migratory plans (Carling and Schewel 2018; de Haas 2021; Ferwerda and Gest 2021; Kuschminder and Koser 2017). The limited studies that examine the effect of border policy on migrant perspectives focus on those already at the border, leaving the effect of such policies on the longer pipeline of migrants in transit less understood (Hammoud-Gallego 2024; Massey et al. 2016; Schon and Leblang 2021).

In response, we narrow the lens on this hard-to-reach but critical subset of migrants. The term "transit migration" lacks a formal definition (Missbach and Phillips 2020; Mixed Migration Centre 2023), although it has encompassed politicized terms such as "caravans" in the Central American corridor, "boat people" off Australia, and "*pateras*" or *cayucos*" at Europe's southern frontier, transit migrants who cross into another country after having left their country of origin intending to enter a third country (de Massol de Rebetz 2021), are heavily invested in the original decision to alter their lives, but they are also highly sensitive to destination state border policies (Kiriscioglu 2026; Mixed Migration Centre 2023; Siviş et al. 2024). Transit migrants weigh the availability of irregular and regular pathways and contextual factors (da Silva Rocha 2010; Yazar and Gitter 2023). They also transmit their experiences to prospective migrants in their countries of origin. At the front line of global human mobility, migration research can greatly benefit from better understanding their behavior and decision-making.

To address this gap in knowledge, we employ a novel survey of over 40,000 migrant respondents in transit through Costa Rica between 2021 and 2025—a period spanning the Biden administration and the first nine months of the second Trump administration. The survey contains indicators on demographic characteristics, migratory factors, and journey intentions, giving us great insight into migrant behavior and perceptions during a period of flux in American immigration policy. We utilize survey responses on direction choices and destination intentions as a proxy for monthly migratory trends. And using multinomial analysis and logistic regression, we assess the relationship between US political shifts and migrant aspirations. We then identify the factors, contexts, and demographic characteristics that appear to affect migrant decision-making.

We find that Trump's inauguration was a critical turning point in the perceptions and behavior of migrants in transit. The share of our respondents who reported intending to enter the United States dropped from 87%—a number consistent with intentions throughout the Biden administration—to 24% after 20 January 2025. The key difference, we surmise, is the credibility of Trump's threats to migrants already on the move, even before his policies could be fully implemented. In comparison, the Biden administration conveyed mixed signals to migrants by maintaining a welcoming stance to migrants while implementing restrictive policies.

Yet, we also find that some populations of migrants were more deterred by Trump's return to power than others. Migrants financing their journey through employment in transit countries and migrants relying on mobile app information were the most significantly deterred. With their stable income, the employed likely felt more able to delay their onward migration northward until better conditions prevail. Those consulting mobile apps are more likely to be aware of policy trends and circumstances at the US border.

Meanwhile, vulnerable populations—particularly migrants traveling with children—and those motivated by economic necessity or legal residency in an alternative location were less deterred. Migrants traveling with children likely perceive an escalation of commitment—what is commonly known as a "sunk cost"—associated with diverting from their initially intended destinations. They may also be less interested in alternative destinations that are less conducive to childrearing due to safety concerns or the availability of family caregivers. Those concerned by legal residency in an alternative destination and those with existential concerns are more likely to tolerate the risk of staying on course, as they keep stability and desire permanent moves outside of their country of origin. The varying effects we observe indicate that restrictive border policies may not be universally effective in deterring migrants.

In the next section, we situate our research among other social scientific studies focused on migrant preferences and behavior in the context of destination state policies. We then present the results from our descriptive analysis of transit migrant intentions. We run logistic regression analysis to better identify the drivers of the observed change and to understand which migrants divert or persist despite changing circumstances at the US border. In the final section, we conclude with a discussion of our findings and other avenues for further research.

Border Policy and Migrant Perceptions

Restrictive immigration policies have historically presented mixed results in the face of persistent migration pressures across different contexts. While some policies appear to immediately stem migration flows, research shows that migrants adjust their behavior or expectations and border encounters rise soon after (Ambrosini and Hajer 2023; Czaika and de Haas 2013). In general, empirical evidence suggests that border control measures implemented by high-income destination states had no significant effect in deterring migrants and often intensified humanitarian crises (Fernández-Rodríguez and Freier 2024; Massey 2020; Massey and Riosmena 2010). Yet many destinations—especially in Western states where populist parties have gained influence or power—continue to pursue such policies, driven by the threat citizens believe immigrants pose to their economic well-being and native cultural identity (Gest 2016; Halla et al. 2017; Häusermann et al., 2023; Kaufmann 2017; Kaufmann and Goodwin 2018; Kurer and Van Staalduinen 2022; Shehaj et al. 2021). Restrictive policies may be effective among *prospective* migrants—those who have yet to depart their countries of origin—as the increase in costs and risk deter them from initiating a migratory journey (Carling and Schewel 2018; de Haas 2021; Jolivet 2024; Yu et al. 2025).

However, *transit* migrants—who are in the midst of their migration journey—show greater tendencies of diversion or rerouting through irregular networks than prospective migrants yet to depart their country of origin (Borkert et al. 2018; Carling and Schewel 2018; de Haas 2021; Dekker and Engbersen 2012; Gilbert and Koser 2006; Kiriscioglu 2026; Massey 1999; Thielemann 2004). With the implementation of restrictive policies, *transit* migrant aspirations change minimally, whereas their capability to complete their planned migration journey decreases significantly (Blair and Solodoch 2025; de Haas 2021). For them, the sunk cost of already making the migratory decision and the potential reward of successfully arriving at their destinations make returning home highly unlikely. Rather, they pursue the options of staying in transit zones or bypassing barriers to entry (Andersson and Jutvik 2023; Massey et al. 2016; Vogt 2018).

There is limited research on the mechanics behind these choices, particularly among transit migrants who have not yet reached the border of their desired destination but remain on the move. Distance to destination plays a crucial role in transit migrant intentions and behavior, especially when border policies are enforced. Being further away from one's intended destination elicits a different reaction than being closer. Each transit point becomes an opportunity for transit migrants to reevaluate their options (Hagen-Zanker and Mallett 2016).

Transit migrants near the border have been observed to react to restrictive policies by halting on their route and gathering information on entry prospects to weigh the costs and benefits of each route under changing conditions (Alencar 2023; Borkert

et al. 2018; Dekker and Engbersen 2012; Emmer and Richter 2016; Gilbert and Koser 2006). With increasing barriers, transit migrants near the border are more likely to consider irregular and more dangerous routes (Kuschminder and Koser 2017; Massey et al. 2016; Moreno-Lax and Lemberg-Pedersen 2019; Schon and Leblang 2021; Vezzoli 2021). Information campaigns by humanitarian organizations and others that advise migrants of safer options can facilitate less risky choices and greater awareness about their human rights (Gest et al. 2026; Morgenstern 2020, 2025; Tjaden et al. 2018). On the other hand, negative, deterrent-driven information campaigns amplify the risks and dangers associated with onward migration, making transit migrants more likely to divert their course (Dempster and Tjaden 2021).

In general, researchers find migrants are highly skeptical about the information they receive. The role of credible information plays a critical role in shaping migrant behavior, as it determines whether a migrant will adjust their strategies in practice (*behavior*) rather than merely revising their intended outcomes (*intentions*; Carling 2014; Czaika and de Haas 2012; de Haas 2021; Ferwerda and Gest 2021; Massey et al. 1993**).** Most are informed at the onset of their journeys and navigate unknown routes based on common sense and information from trusted sources, such as friends, family, and other migrants along the migratory corridor. However, the credibility and quality of information vary. Information producers can earn credibility by repeatedly exposing migrants to consistent information messaging and presenting information that mirrors their personal experiences (Kiriscioglu 2026; Lecheler and de Vreese 2013; Oxley 2020), particularly in the context of greater misinformation online (Alencar 2023; Borkert et al. 2018; Dekker et al. 2018; Emmer and Richter 2016). Information that matches personal experiences, including verification from migrants' networks, can be the most influential in building trust with migrants (Morgenstern 2025; Tjaden et al. 2018).

In this context, President Trump will have built credibility as an information source given the consistency of his and his administrations' anti-immigration approach since his initial campaign in 2015. Since his inauguration in 2025, Trump signed over 200 executive orders and prioritized denying access to the U.S.-Mexico border, building the border wall, and deporting and detaining both new and established immigrants and their family members (Debusmann 2025; ImmpolicyTracking 2025). Multiple studies find that migrants consider diverting routes only when restrictive border rhetoric and policies are actually enforced (Andersson and Jutvik 2023; Brekke et al. 2017; Czaika and de Haas 2013).

In comparison, the Biden administration conveyed mixed signals with its relatively open stance to immigration, followed by growing restrictiveness in the face of mounting domestic political pressure by 2023 (Galston 2024; Gamboa 2023). But even as the Biden administration tightened border security and cooperation with Mexico, it sought to sustain or expand legal pathways (Department of State 2023; DHS 2023, 2024), giving hope to those seeking entry and sustaining the viability of the United States as a destination (Debusmann 2025).

It is thus plausible that President Trump's mere victory in the 2024 US presidential election would be sufficient to compel migrants in transit to reconsider their options, if not entirely abandon the idea of entering the United States via the Central American corridor. In this study, we evaluate the effect of Trump's victory, inauguration, and early policy actions, compared to policy development under the Biden administration, on the intentions and behavior of migrants in transit. To do so, we leverage a unique data set that allows us to analyze migrant sentiment during this period directly from the source.

Data and Methodology

We use novel survey data from 41,644 transit migrants in Costa Rica collected between 4 November 2021 to 29 September 2025 by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) mission in Costa Rica. This survey broadly captures the characteristics and behavior of migrants at a bottleneck in Central America.[1] IOM consistently fields this survey in vital transit points within San José, the Costa Rican capital, and at the country's southern and northern borders with Panama and Nicaragua, respectively, to monitor trends in human mobility and account for the humanitarian needs, impetuses, and goals of migrants in transit (see Figure 1). Typically administered in humanitarian shelters and transportation stations along popular transit routes, IOM enumerators ask migrants to participate voluntarily in these in-person surveys with the option to end the interview at any stage.[2] Migrants are not offered any incentives to participate. The survey is available in Spanish, English, French, Portuguese, and Haitian Creole to reach as many diverse migrant populations as possible.

Surveys are conducted in high-mobility, high-density, "bottleneck" transit areas commonly used by migrants to best capture a substantial sample of the migration population. To minimize selection bias, enumerators typically implemented systematic sampling, ensuring that potential migrant respondents had an equal and predictable chance of selection. In high transit sites like the Las Tablillas (Los Chiles) and Paso Canoas border crossings, enumerators often implemented non-probabilistic sampling based on availability instead, since maintaining the stable selection intervals of systematic sampling was infeasible. In San José, where many migrants paused their journeys, enumerators sought the largest sample possible (*see also* IOM 2024b; Figure 2).

Some limitations persist despite using these sampling techniques. First, there are unofficial and clandestine routes that are beyond IOM's reach, often in mountains and forests that are difficult for IOM enumerators to access. Therefore, the survey is unable to reach the small population of migrants utilizing such illicit networks to travel (IOM 2024b). However, only

[1] IOM enumerators tell us that migrants prefer using land routes through Costa Rica due to marine routes being expensive. Migrants must either hire illicit smuggling services or pay a $300 ticket per individual for a ferry along Central America.

[2] Please see Supplemental *Appendix A* for the consent message read by the IOM enumerators before every survey interview.

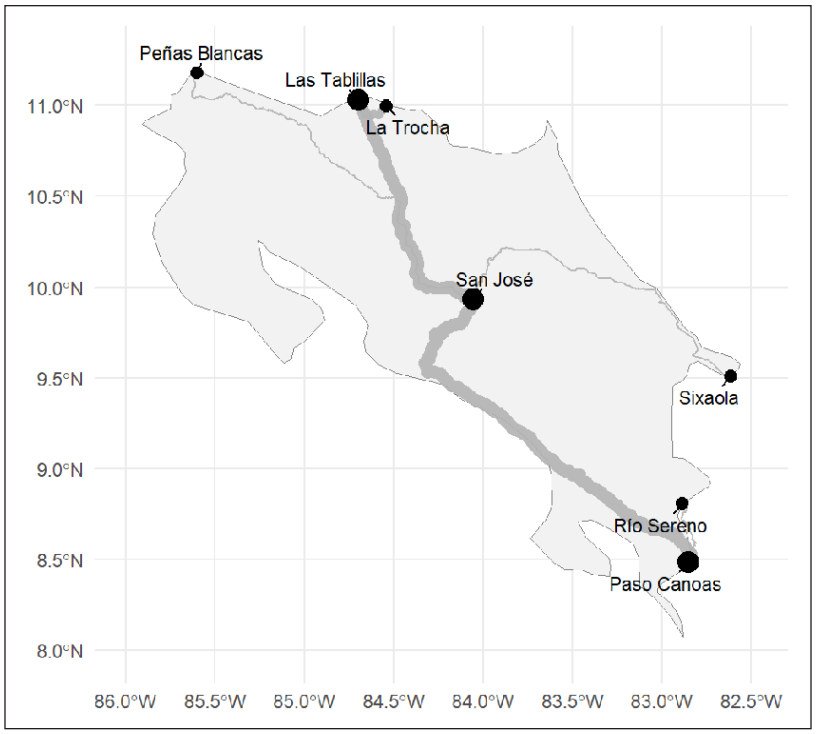


Figure 2. IOM Survey Sites in Costa Rica.
Note. Larger points at Las Tablillas, Paso Canoas, and San José indicate primary survey sites. Route thickness determined by migrant traffic.

approximately 9% of migrants along the Central American migration corridor are believed to be using clandestine services to navigate this region (Laiton 2024). Second, some surveys have incomplete observations as enumerators survey respondents during temporary stays at monitoring points (i.e., waiting for the bus to their next location) and have to end surveys abruptly if respondents rush off to catch their next mode of transportation. While acknowledging these limitations, the use of systematic random sampling at high-traffic locations yields a large and diverse sample that is broadly representative of the migrant population transiting through Costa Rica.

The vast majority of our survey respondents reported moving northbound (92.8%). The survey captured an international population of migrants, albeit one dominated by South Americans due to the continent's proximity and land connection (IOM 2025b). While some migrants came from Colombia (7.4%) and Ecuador (3.4%), the vast majority originated from Venezuela (81.5%), where economic hardships and political persecution were rife during the period of study. A majority of those who reported reasons for migration other than humanitarian emergencies, said they were migrating due to economic (97.2%) and political (67.3%) reasons. Most respondents sought entry into the US (89.7%). The majority of respondents identified themselves as male (59.0%), and most traveled in a group (72.3%) rather than alone (27.7%). A majority of respondents reported that they had minors in their traveling group (59.5%).

The structural factors along the Central American corridor were relatively stable throughout the duration of our study. Transit migration has been persistent in Costa Rica since 2015, when the deterioration of socioeconomic and political conditions in the region motivated populations to move (Chaves-González and Mora 2021). During this period, migratory pathways have remained consistent, while migration volumes have fluctuated (IOM 2025b)—underscoring the importance of examining variation in migrant behavior to better understand the impact of destination state policies.

To examine our subjects' responses to changing US approaches, we bracket the IOM survey data into time periods framed by pivots in US border governance during the Biden administration (2020–2024) and the early second Trump (2024–2025) administration. For the Biden administration, these milestones are:

1. 11 May 2023 enactment of the "Circumvention of Legal Pathways" final rule that ended the Title 42 program; and
2. 2 June 2024 enforcement of "Executive Order to Secure the Border."

For the Trump administration, we use the:

3. 5 November 2024 US Presidential Election as a reference point to test whether migrants reacted upon Trump's election as the next President of the United States, a signal that extreme border policies would soon ensue; and

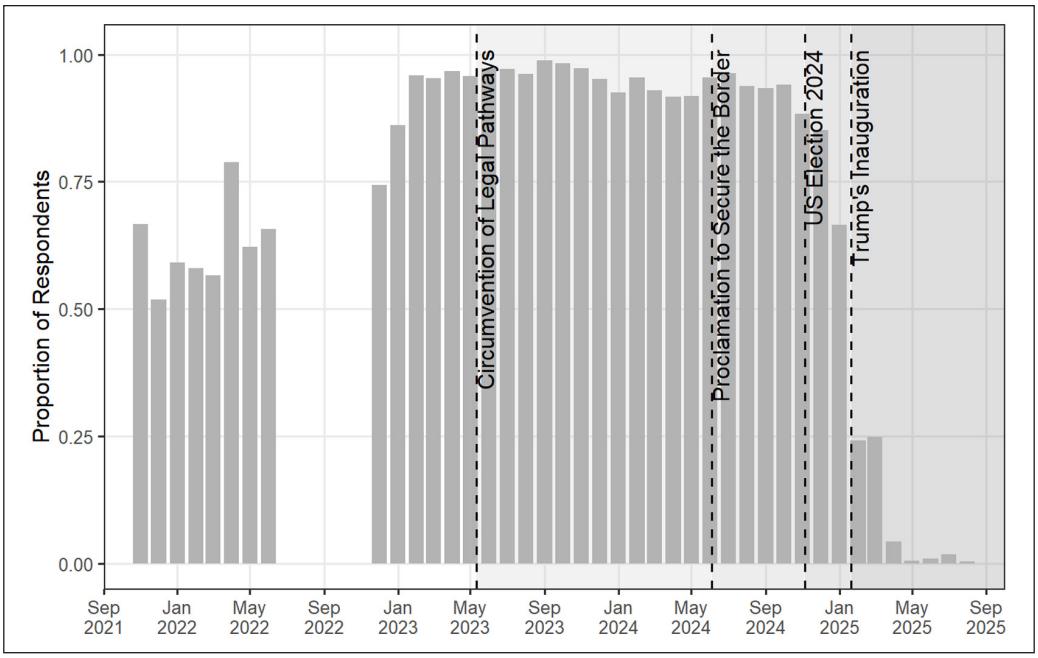


Figure 3. Intentions to Go to the US.
Note. Bars show monthly proportions of respondents intending to enter the US. Labeled vertical dotted lines indicate the beginning of each US policy period. Data between 15 June 2022 and 15 December 2022 is not available.

4. 20 January 2025 US Inauguration as a pivot point, as President Trump signed numerous executive orders prioritizing border control and mass deportation (Bustillo 2025; ImmpolicyTracking 2025).

With these milestones, we observe how respondents answered the questions: (a) *Which country is your intended destination?* and (b) *Are you headed north or south?*

To account for changes in local circumstances coinciding with periods of new policy implementation that might otherwise explain migrant decision-making behavior (Castles 2004; Czaika and de Haas, 2013, 2015), we supplement our preliminary analysis with logistic regression and multinomial analysis that holds constant individual demographic factors and local contexts to examine the US border policy changes that may drive any observed changes in migrants' self-reported intentions. More specifically, we employ Firth logistic regressions to understand the heterogenous impacts of policy and rhetoric changes on travel direction choice. The preference for Firth (1993) logistic regression is due to the heavily imbalanced direction choices and consequent "rare events" that may produce biased or infinite estimates. As northbound migration is the most dominant choice by a large margin (92.8%), this imbalance can lead to common statistical tools producing biased estimates because some independent variables may almost perfectly predict the direction of travel. To further simplify the analysis, we consolidate "Stay" and "South" direction choices under one "Divert" option, creating a binary outcome of "Divert" or "North" choices.

We designate "Divert" as the reference option, and thus study migrant's decision to travel North. The main independent variable is a dummy variable labeled "Trump" that takes the value 1 following the 2024 US Presidential election, and 0 for the period prior to the election. The other independent variables are a variety of migrant demographic, attitudinal, and contextual variables which we believe influence their responses to changing migration landscapes. Finally, the model includes interaction terms between each of the migrant variables with the "Trump" dummy variable to study how the "Trump Effect" varies across different types of migrants.

Results

Migrant Intentions and US Border Policy

In our analysis of migrant intentions, we find that the 2025 inauguration of President Trump produced a stunning deterrent effect. As displayed in Figure 3, intentions to migrate to the US remained relatively strong and stable during the Biden administration period, despite border crossings declining near the end of the Biden administration's tenure.[3] These trends show high intentions among transit migrants to pursue US entry despite the enactment of the Circumvention of Legal Pathways final rule in 2023 and the Proclamation to Secure the Border in 2024. However, intentions to go to the US noticeably dipped with the

[3] We were unable to obtain data from IOM between 15 June 2022 and 15 December 2022, resulting in the gap in observations.

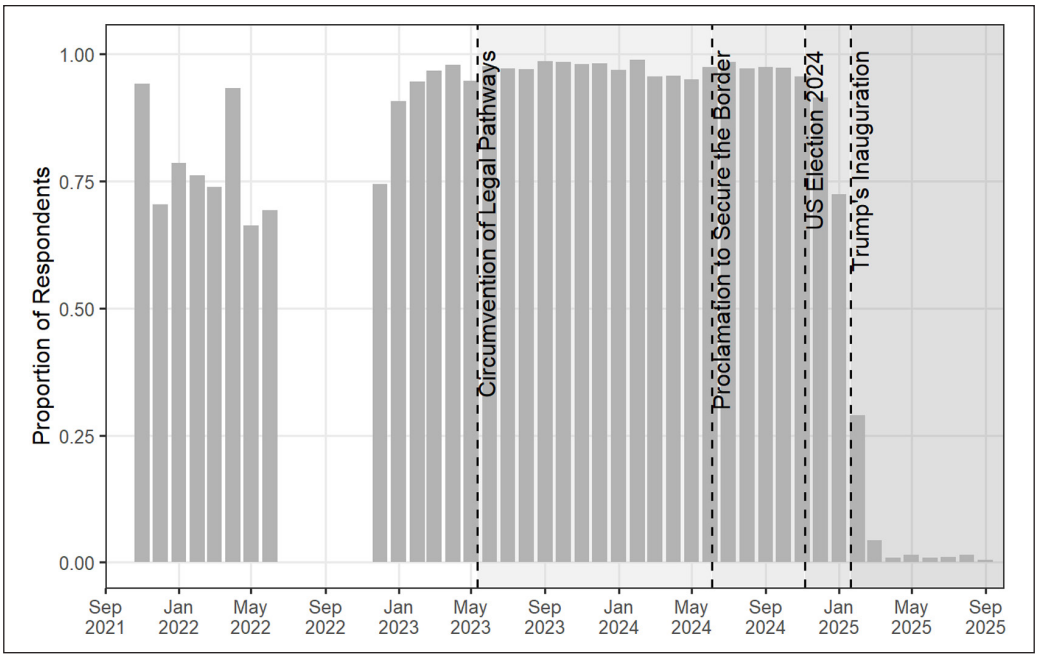


Figure 4. Intentions to Pursue Northward Route.

Note. Bars show monthly proportions of respondents intending to migrate northbound. This includes intentions to travel to Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Belize, Mexico, the US, and Canada. Labeled vertical dotted lines indicate the beginning of each US policy period. Data between 15 June 2022 and 15 December 2022 is not available.

2024 election of Donald Trump and dramatically dropped after his inauguration on 20 January 2025—a total *volte face*. Similar trends appear when migrants were asked about their intentions to pursue northbound journeys as shown in Figure 4. Reports from IOM indicate that migration flows have reversed, now exhibiting a return migration flow from the north to the south (Gest 2025; IOM 2025a), further supporting the finding that the "Trump Effect" deterred northbound migration.

When enumerators queried migrants in transit about their alternative destinations, per Figure 5, respondents generally reported "no alternative destination" over the course of the Biden administration. In fact, even as the Biden administration enacted the "Circumvention of Legal Pathways" final rule, migrants responding with "no alternative destination" progressively increased, suggesting their greater determination to enter the US, perhaps in anticipation of more restrictive immigration regime in the near future. After Trump's inauguration on 20 January 2025, Venezuela emerged as the top intended destination—in almost every case a return to the subject's origins—while Costa Rica rose as a preferred alternative and Mexico declined.[4] Taken together, the results suggest that the mere rhetoric of Trump and his appointees may have dampened intentions among migrants from continuing their northbound journeys, before the policies were even implemented.

This principal finding is underpinned by evidence that migrants were consistently attentive to the prospects for entry across all time periods; they did not suddenly pay attention once Trump was elected. They reported paying attention to destination state policy changes often by communicating with diaspora, family members, or former migrants that successfully completed the journey to the intended destination (Borkert et al. 2018; Morgenstern 2025). Per Figure 6, migrants consistently reported using messenger services such as Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp as their primary source of information. When asked about what priorities may encourage them to consider diversion to an alternative destination, across the US policy shifts Figure 7, migrants said they would alter their plans to optimize for their economic needs or legal residency. This emphasis on material needs should not undermine their asylum claims. A majority of our subjects reported humanitarian concerns about their persecution and endangerment—primarily in Venezuela; they simply sought to ensure that they could meet their basic needs wherever they found refuge.

To support our findings, we further perform a Regression Discontinuity Design (RDD) analysis using the date of Trump's inauguration as a critical juncture. RDD analysis allows us to estimate the effect of Trump's inauguration on transit migratory intentions by comparing direction outcomes just before and just after the event. By focusing on immediate pre- and post-inauguration interviews, the RDD allows us to isolate the impact of the inauguration itself from that of other relevant events that may have occurred in late 2024 and early 2025. By focusing on a narrow window around the inauguration date, the RDD minimizes concerns about compositional changes in the sample of migrants. Since traveling to Costa Rica takes at least several

[4] In the Supplemental Appendix, *Table B1* arranges the respondents descriptive statistics by year.

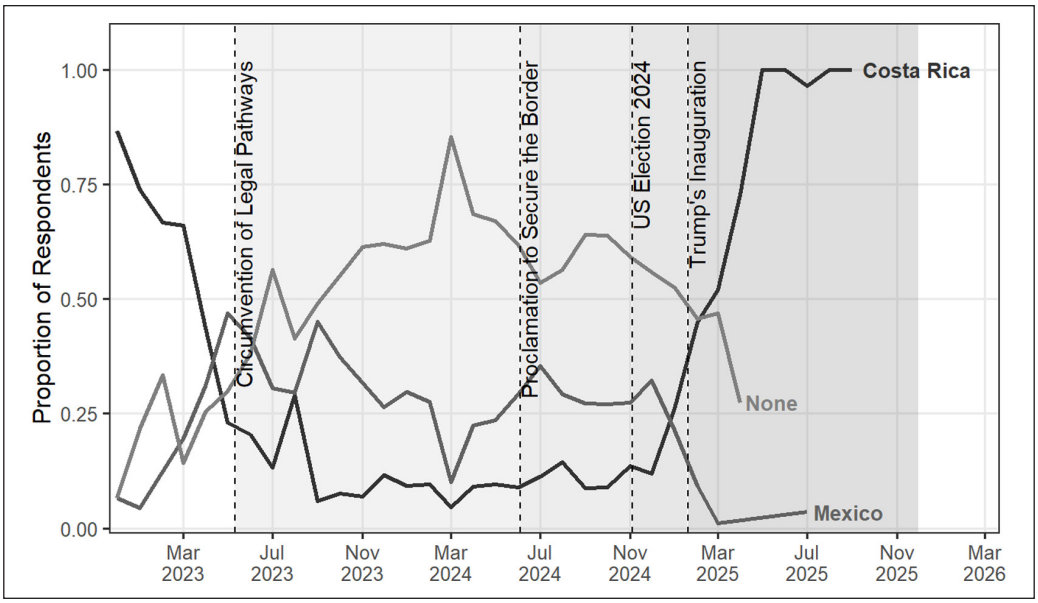


Figure 5. Top 3 Choice of Alternative Destinations.

Note. Lines show monthly proportions of respondents holding the labeled alternative destination as an option. Labeled vertical dotted lines indicate the beginning of each US policy period. Line for "None" does not reach the end compared to others as it drops below the Top 3 after mid-2025. Data is available starting 15 December 2022.

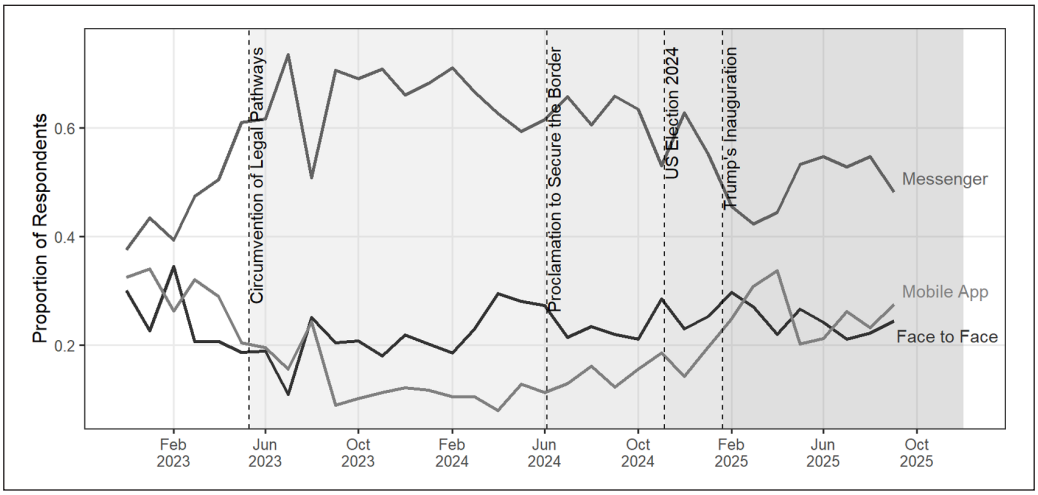


Figure 6. Primary Information Sources.

Note. Lines show monthly proportions of respondents indicating they utilize the labeled medium as their primary information source. "Messenger" include chat services like Facebook messenger and WhatsApp. "Mobile App" include TikTok, websites, and other mobile app services. Labeled vertical dotted lines indicate the beginning of each US policy period.

days, shifts in who begins the journey at the country of origin (potentially driven by the inauguration) would not yet be reflected in the sample, eliminating concerns about differential selection at the origin.

The RDD results confirm our findings, showing a statistically significant 36% drop in intentions to pursue northbound migration ($p < .001$). Figure 8 visualizes the effect of Trump's inauguration, displaying a sharp contrast in northbound intentions among transit migrants before and after the event. Supplemental Appendix C includes additional RDD analyses using the other reference points identified in Section 3, as well as other events like the 2024 Venezuelan elections. In all cases, we find no significant effects that match the observed impact of Trump's inauguration on transit migrant behavior.

Heterogenous Responses to the "Trump Effect"

Table 1 presents the average marginal effects (AMEs) from the Firth logistic regression that allows us to examine

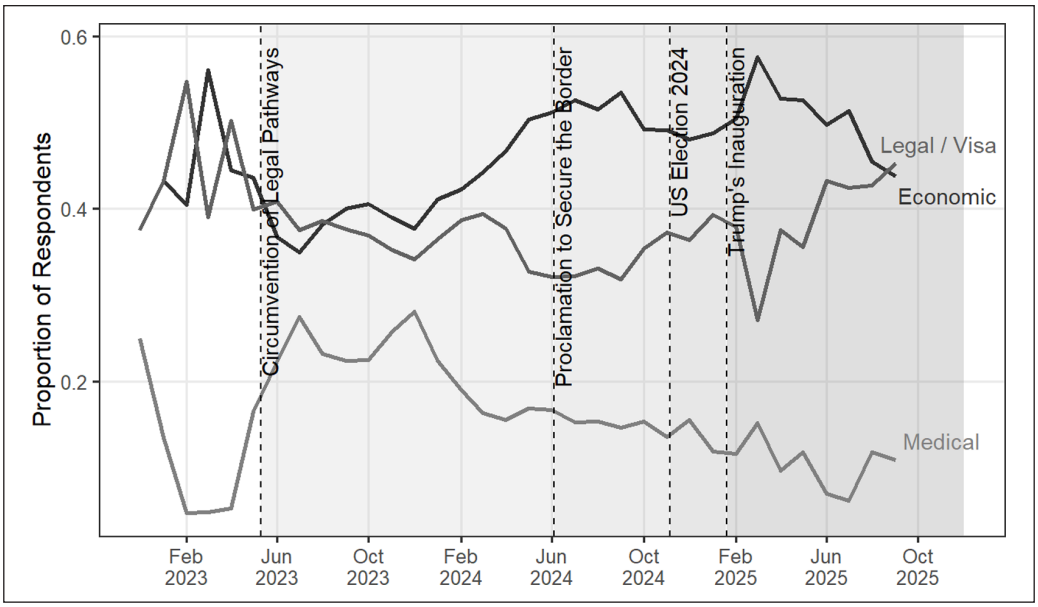


Figure 7. Priorities for Diversion.
Note. Lines show monthly proportions of respondents indicating the labeled need as priority to consider diversion. Labeled vertical dotted lines indicate the beginning of each US policy period.

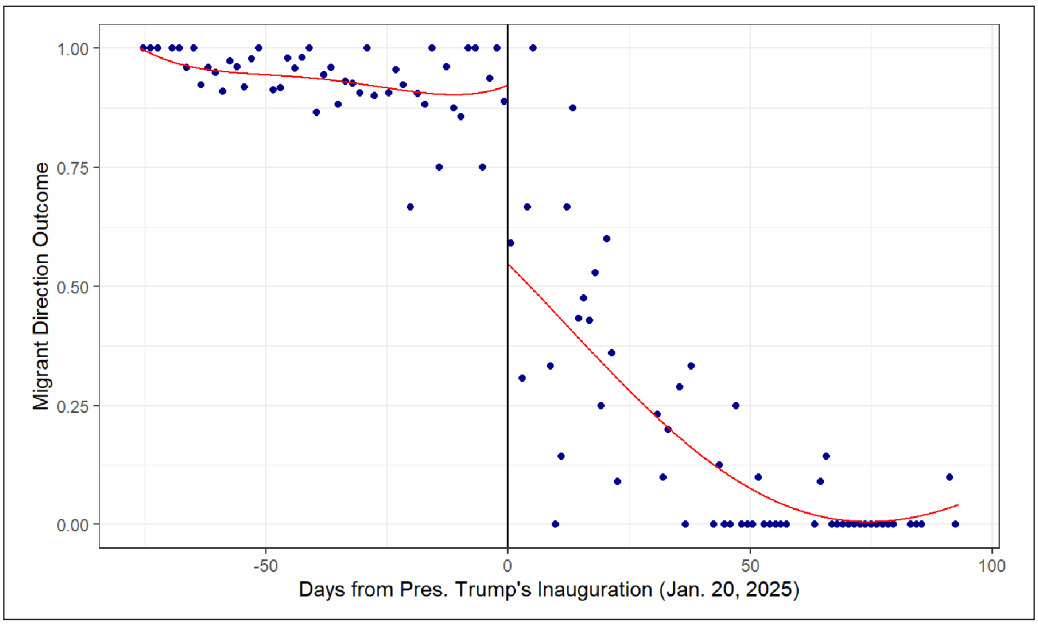


Figure 8. RDD Plot of "President Trump's Inauguration" (20 Jan. 2025).
Note. Vertical line shows the date of policy implementation. Plot shows daily proportions of respondents indicating northbound migration 76 days before (since 2024 US Elections) and hundred days after the policy implementation date. Red line shows local polynomial regression fits.

variation in responses to the Trump Effect. The first column shows the AMEs in the pre-inauguration period, while the second column presents them for the post-inauguration period. In each case the AMEs tell us how much the predicted probability of going northward increases or decreases when each variable changes, holding the other observed values constant.

Which migrants were most affected by this observed "Trump Effect"? Individuals migrating for miscellaneous reasons—reasons outside political, violent, economic, and familial motivations—were significantly deterred during the Trump period. Meanwhile, refugees and migrants traveling for economic and family reunification did not exhibit a significant change in northbound intentions.

Table 1. Firth Logistic Regressions (AMEs Reported)—Reference Group: Divert.

Variables	Northbound intentions (Pre-Trump)	Northbound intentions (Post-Trump)
Demographic		
Age	−0.000 [−0.000, 0.000]	0.000 [−0.000, 0.000]
Non-male (female, non-binary)	−0.003 [−0.009, 0.003]	0.000 [−0.034, 0.035]
Count of minors (in travel group)	0.001 [−0.000, 0.003]	0.015* [0.003, 0.027]
Pregnant	−0.050*** [−0.072, −0.029]	−0.080** [−0.140, −0.020]
Reasons *(binary variables)*		
Refugee (political persecution and violence)	0.019*** [0.009, 0.028]	0.024 [−0.010, 0.059]
Economic (seeking employment)	0.013 [−0.010, 0.036]	0.052 [−0.025, 0.128]
Family reunification	0.019*** [0.011, 0.026]	0.022 [−0.035, 0.079]
Other	−0.017* [−0.030, −0.003]	−0.125*** [−0.179, −0.072]
Priorities for diversion *(binary variables)*		
Economic (seeking employment)	−0.013* [−0.024, −0.003]	0.404*** [0.305, 0.503]
Family reunification	0.002 [−0.001, 0.014]	0.047 [−0.011, 0.106]
Legal (visa in an alternative destination)	−0.008* [−0.015, −0.002]	0.042* [0.001, 0.083]
Medical (personal health)	−0.028*** [−0.037, −0.019]	−0.099*** [−0.145, −0.053]
Other	−0.014 [−0.043, 0.015]	0.011 [−0.064, 0.085]
Traveling group *(reference = no children)*		
With children	−0.011 [−0.030, 0.008]	0.606*** [0.282, 0.929]
Information source *(binary variables)*		
Messenger (Facebook messenger, WhatsApp)	0.001 [−0.001, 0.011]	0.020 [−0.028, 0.067]
Mobile Apps (TikTok, websites, social media)	0.005 [−0.002, 0.012]	−0.111*** [−0.150, −0.072]
Face to Face	−0.011** [−0.018, −0.003]	−0.026 [−0.062, 0.011]
Other	−0.030** [−0.052, −0.008]	0.044 [−0.014, 0.101]
Funding *(binary variables)*		
Self (personal budget)	0.001 [−0.001, 0.010]	0.072** [0.026, 0.119]
Working in transit (Income from employment in transit country)	0.002 [−0.006, 0.010]	−0.244*** [−0.299, −0.188]
Remittances (family sending money)	0.011** [0.004, 0.018]	0.059** [0.014, 0.103]
Loan	−0.166 [−0.545, 0.213]	−0.039 [−0.119, 0.040]
Other	−0.001 [−0.009, 0.008]	−0.041 [−0.092, 0.010]
None	0.013 [−0.013, 0.039]	0.133* [0.022, 0.244]
Education *(reference = low)*		
High (technical school, university, and above)	−0.011* [−0.019, −0.002]	−0.026 [−0.073, 0.021]
Medium (high school diploma)	−0.010** [−0.016, −0.004]	0.009 [−0.029, 0.046]
n	11,118	
Likelihood-ratio χ^2	18,502.17	

Note. Average Marginal Effects reported with 95% confidence intervals in brackets.
†90.0, * 95.0, ** 99.0, *** 99.9.

There is also some heterogeneity in the "Trump Effect" depending on migrants' access to information on their journey. In particular, migrants relying on TikTok and other consumer social media platforms, saw a larger decline in northbound travel intentions than other migrants under the Trump period. Migrants relying on information from miscellaneous sources, messenger services, and face-to-face communications did not show a significant shift in intentions in the Trump period. The higher decline on northbound travel intentions among migrants relying on social media platforms likely stems from exposure to real-time credible deterrence signals from President Trump and negative information campaigns often shared on these platforms (Dekker et al. 2018; Dempster and Tjaden 2021; Morgenstern 2025).

Vulnerable migrants, notably pregnant women and those with medical priorities, were more likely to be deterred from the northbound route. Pregnancy was consistently associated with reduced northbound migration intentions across the Biden and Trump periods. Similarly, migrants with personal health priorities were consistently hesitant to pursue northbound journeys. These results are intuitive, as these vulnerable migrants are relatively more risk averse than other migrants and may prefer the safer divert option than continuing to pursue the dangerous northbound route with less chance of success (Chort 2014; IOM 2024a; UNICEF 2025; Vogt 2018).

In contrast, a number of attributes increased migrants' probability of pursuing northbound routes after Trump's

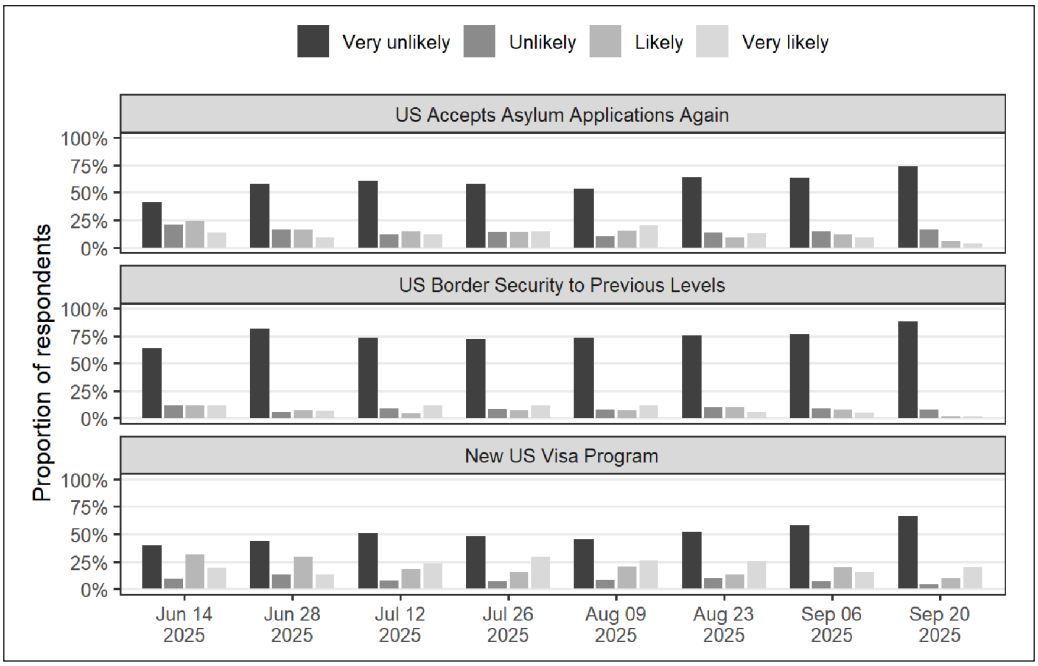


Figure 9. Proportion of Respondents for Each US Scenario on Asylum Applications, Border Security, and Visa Program.
Note. Bars show bi-weekly proportions of responses.

election. People with economic motivations for migration and those traveling with children exhibited a similarly substantial increase in their probability of persisting northbound. This was also the case if the traveling group included more minors, but to a lesser magnitude. Similar results appear for migrants seeking legal residency in another country. Under more restrictive policies, these migrants appear to be less responsive to deterrence. Migrants traveling with children likely perceive an escalation of commitment—what is commonly known as a "sunk cost"—associated with diverting from their initially intended destinations. They may also be less interested in alternative destinations along the Central American corridor that are less conducive to childrearing due to safety concerns or the availability of family caregivers. Those motivated by existential concerns are more likely to tolerate risk. (Doctors Without Borders 2023a, 2023b; IOM 2024a; Oré 2025; UNICEF 2025; Vogt 2018).

Financial needs also played a role. Those with a previously allocated personal budget, those receiving remittances from family, and those without a concrete funding source all exhibited significant intentions to pursue northbound migration. However, migrants funded primarily by income from employment in transit countries were more deterred from pursuing northbound journeys after Trump's election than other migrants. This offers new evidence to the idea that facilitating the economic livelihood of migrants in transit countries may be as effective at stemming flows as restrictive border policies (Mixed Migration Centre 2023).

"The Trump Effect" and Migrant Aspirations

To explore migrants' future outlook and its conditionality following the decline in northbound intentions due to the Trump Effect, three questions were added to the survey instrument on 14 June 2025, asking respondents to evaluate the likelihood that they would attempt US entry under a variety of future conditions:

1. If the US were to accept asylum applications again, how likely are you to apply for asylum in the US?
2. If the US were to return to former border security levels, how likely are you to try to enter the US?
3. If the US offered a new visa program for which you qualify, how likely are you to apply for that visa?

Results for each indicator are presented in Figure 9. Each panel shows bi-weekly proportions of responses to each scenario presented. Overall, a majority of migrants remain *very unlikely* to consider entering the US if the US began accepting asylum applications again or if the US were to lower border security to former levels. The effect is slightly smaller when respondents consider a hypothetical visa program for which they would be eligible. However, the growing proportion of respondents indicating a *very unlikely* chance that they would attempt US entry suggests that the "Trump Effect" not only changed migrants' immediate plans, but also suppressed many migrants' aspirations to pursue entry into the United States more broadly in the future.

Discussion

In April 2025, the US Department of Homeland Security—which oversees border security and immigration enforcement—crowed about "100 days of the most secure border in American history: a remarkable, historic turnaround" (DHS 2025). And despite sharply declining flows in the final year of the Biden administration, the number of US border authorities' encounters indeed dropped even further under Trump. Behind this change in flows and enforcement, we find that the reelection of Donald Trump had a profound effect on the intentions and expectations of migrants in transit through Central America. After his election, and particularly his inauguration, we observe an extraordinary decline in migrants' desire to move northbound.

As the composition of the migrants in transit we survey stayed generally consistent—along with their reported motivations and personal attributes—we attribute the deterrence to the credibility of Trump's restrictive posture. We emphasize this posture because the effects we observe took hold before Trump was inaugurated and assumed power, and before the US government had time to implement his policies after his inauguration. Immigration enforcement was a strong and persistent theme during the 2024 presidential election campaign, and Trump immediately signed dozens of restrictive executive orders on immigration upon taking office.

Our logistic regression analyses reveal that some migrants were more affected by Trump's reelection than others. This suggests that restrictive policies and posturing do not produce uniform deterrence but instead intensify the perception of risk among migrants facing greater constraints and less viable alternatives. Despite this heterogeneity, we still find that a majority of the migrants surveyed after June 2025 remain very unlikely to attempt to enter the United States, even if the American government began accepting asylum applications again, if the US were to lower border security to former levels, or if the respondent was eligible for a new visa program in the future.

The stark contrast in migrant intentions under the prior Biden and current Trump administrations suggests further avenues of research. Despite both administrations deploying restrictive border policies, results show migrants were more deterred under the Trump administration. We hypothesize that the availability of legal pathways to enter the US under the Biden administration encouraged migrants to wait in Mexico for potential entry opportunities, whereas the Trump administration more comprehensively closed off avenues for admission altogether. These differing policy environments may have generated distinct migrant behavior.

Of course, our study can only speak to the most immediate effects of the changes to US immigration and border policies under Presidents Biden and Trump. As prospective migrants adapt to the new conditions in the United States and as humanitarian risks change in countries of origin, people may adapt their migratory behavior and approaches. We still know little about the interaction of external policy factors and migrants' risk aversion characteristics (e.g., Kirisciogl u et al. 2024), or how environmental and other structural factors interact with migrant decision-making. We also hope to learn more about how migrants evaluate the prospect of return to their countries of origin and the suitability of transit countries for refuge. It is notable that Mexico's status as an alternative destination declines so precipitously in our research, placing greater pressure on countries like Costa Rica. Further ethical considerations also arise from the impact of restrictive border policies, where these policies transfer risks onto transit migrants who face heightened exposure to distress, danger, and uncertainty. Such policies may deter entry, but they do so by redistributing risk to an already vulnerable population.

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Supplemental Material

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