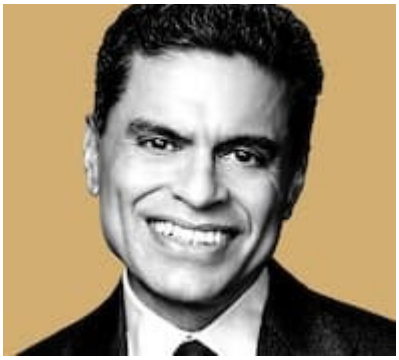
Opinion

Democrats need to admit that they're wrong on immigration



By Fareed Zakaria

The Democrats are confronting a crisis that could cripple their chances at the polls at the national, state and local level. I'm talking about immigration. It's happening not only because Republicans are taking advantage of the problem but also because Democrats are unwilling to accept that their policy ideas on the issue are wrong and grossly inadequate to the challenge at hand.

Apprehensions at the southern border are surging again. Texas border towns have long been inundated by the waves of arrivals, but now that migrants are being bused into cities such as New York, Chicago and D.C., local governments there are facing backbreaking expenses to house them. New York Mayor Eric Adams (D) was exaggerating only slightly when he said the problem would "destroy" the city.

The Biden administration's various efforts have amounted to Band-Aids on a massive, open wound. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas has said repeatedly that the asylum system is broken. But if that's true, we need a drastic, dramatic overhaul of the system, and neither he nor President Biden is proposing anything like that.

To understand how to think of this issue, let's go back to basics. After World War II, the United States developed pathways for people who faced extreme persecution because of their race, religion or beliefs to take refuge in America.

But there are two realities that are critical to turning this idealistic impulse into a workable system. First, there are surely tens of millions of people around the world who could plausibly claim that they face persecution, and the United States cannot possibly take them all in. More important, the United States cannot be forced to give priority to people who break the law and enter the country illegally — and then claim asylum status to legitimize their entry — as opposed to those who follow the rules, apply from their home countries and wait their turn. But that is what is happening every day at the southern border.

Second, these asylum cases must be special and distinct from the cases of people from all over the world who are trying to immigrate to the United States because they are fleeing poverty, disease or violence. People who fall into this category face a complex and elaborate process that entails several mechanisms for obtaining various kinds of visas and work permits, some of which can eventually translate into a green card and eventually citizenship.

But instead of going through that arduous, lengthy process, many seem to have decided that it would be simpler to pay cartels to help them cross the border illegally, present themselves as asylum seekers, and slip into the country while their cases are being adjudicated. In a 17-month period between March 2021 and August 2022, the federal government released more than 1 million migrants into the United States and lost track of over 177,000 of them who had failed to give an address or had provided an invalid one. When the system of due process collapses, as it has, it is most unfair to those who have legitimate claims to asylum or legal immigrant status.

There is only one solution to this crisis, as Nolan Rappaport, a longtime congressional expert on the issue, has suggested: The president must use the power he has in existing law to suspend entirely the admission of asylum seekers while the system digests the millions of immigration cases already pending. The British government has passed a law to this effect.

Other Western countries will undoubtedly follow. The world has changed. There are more than 40 million refugees and asylum seekers globally. We need new laws, standards, courts and systems so that asylum can be granted through some orderly, rational process — rather than just leaving it up to officials in countries that are overwhelmed by illegal entrants at their borders.

The migrant crisis is exposing Democratic policy weakness at every level, from an administration that is scared to take on its progressive wing and take

bold action to states such as New York and Massachusetts, which have “right to shelter” rules that are utterly unworkable in the face of this onslaught. Unless Democrats seize control of the issue, the politics of it will end up having the same effect as in other Western countries — rocket fuel for the populist right.

Donald Trump’s main solution to this problem didn’t work. The very fact that we have had millions of migrants entering the country over the past few years proved that, however much of his wall he actually built, it hasn’t worked. But most Americans know that he sees the current situation as utterly unacceptable and is willing to take extreme measures to end it. They know no such thing about his Democratic opponents.