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## OPINION: America's border deserves thoughtful policy solutions, not campaign soundbites

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With less than a week left in the presidential campaign, the American people can be certain of one thing: former President Donald Trump and Vice President Kamala Harris will continue to blame each other for shortcomings on border security, despite the fact that illegal border crossings in September were at their lowest in years.

Harris, rightfully, blames Trump for derailing a bipartisan border bill. Trump has repeatedly charged Harris with “allowing millions” of undocumented immigrants into the country. He’s even floated the idea of “closing the border” entirely — a policy that would wreak havoc on the economy.

There’s no question that a secure border is essential to any sovereign nation. But by obsessing over walls, checkpoints, and asylum seekers, both campaigns are missing the larger picture: the border isn’t just a line between nations; it’s an area 2.8 million Americans call home. Yes, we need to police the vast spaces between ports of entry, and we need targeted and aggressive enforcement and cooperation with Mexico to address the violence of criminal cartels. But our overarching framework for our land borders must be effective and efficient management, so that these millions of Americans, and their Mexican neighbors, can build regional economies that benefit both countries, and maintain the family and social and cultural ties that make the border so unique and vibrant.

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These millions of people enjoy living in a region that contributes significantly to the U.S. economy. Approximately 5 million American jobs depend on U.S. trade with Mexico, a significant portion of which flows through Southern Texas. The Port of Laredo, now the largest port in the U.S, is key to facilitating this trade. Additionally, the Borderplex region

— which encompasses El Paso, Texas; Las Cruces, New Mexico; and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico — has emerged as the fifth-largest manufacturing hub in North America.

The borderlands represent a vibrant, culturally rich, and economically crucial part of the country that has long been overshadowed as politicians turn border security into a political football.

Since neither campaign appears focused on detailing a true border-focused policy platform, I will detail some key policy areas that deserve more.

First, South Texas is enduring a severe drought that threatens not only the region's residents but also its role as a key agricultural hub. Despite the borderlands' importance to the national economy, this crisis has largely escaped national attention.

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The drought, compounded by Mexico's failure to meet its water delivery obligations under the 1944 Water Treaty, has hit border counties particularly hard. Regions in Texas are running out of water on the state is losing a farm every week. Recently, Texas' only sugar mill closed due to water shortages, costing 500 jobs. Federal intervention — whether through renegotiating water deliveries or providing emergency funding — is urgently needed.

Economic distress is another urgent issue. Poverty rates along the Texas-Mexico border are significantly higher than the rest of Texas, with 23 percent of border residents living below the federal poverty line. Trade, bolstered by the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), remains a crucial economic driver.

Trump deserves credit for securing the deal, but his cavalier talk of “closing the border” jeopardizes that very progress. Instead, both candidates should focus on expanding border and trade infrastructure, particularly in transportation and warehousing, to keep trade flowing and support local economies.

Health care is also a priority. Border communities suffer from high rates of chronic diseases, limited access to health care, and public health threats like opioid addiction. The Texas Border Coalition has called for increased funding for public health programs to address these issues. Both Trump and Harris could deliver real, meaningful solutions, but it's barely been mentioned on the campaign trail.

Of course, border security and immigration reform are also a priority. But the most effective border management solutions will come from those who live and work in the border region.

America needs smart investments in infrastructure, technology, and staffing to secure the land ports of entry while fostering greater cooperation among local, state, and federal law enforcement. And the time is now for comprehensive legislation to truly address the immigration system and secure the border, and do away with temporary executive actions that come and go with each new administration.

Consider the bipartisan Dignity Act, which offers lasting relief for Dreamers, expands work visas to meet labor demands, and reforms the asylum system while maintaining its integrity. The bill also strengthens border management to ensure it is secure, fair, and aligned with U.S. trade and economic interests.

Ultimately, the U.S.-Mexico border is about more than just immigration. It's a dynamic region that plays an essential role in the national economy, culture, and security. The voices of those who live in the border region deserve to be heard, and their needs should be central to — or at the very least, not absent from — discussions about the future of border policy and the potential regional implications.

As we near Election Day, both candidates must move beyond partisan soundbites and offer real, substantive solutions to the challenges facing America's border region that go well beyond security alone.

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