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Policy Recommendations from the George W. Bush Institute

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TACKLING MIGRATION

Strengthening Democracy in the Western Hemisphere



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*The George W. Bush Institute-SMU Economic Growth Initiative
at
The George W. Bush Institute*

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TACKLING MIGRATION: STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE

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The United States must prioritize engagement in the Western Hemisphere to help ensure mutual prosperity and security. Current irregular migration patterns are a symptom of simmering regional instability. Disruptive authoritarian regimes in the region have intensified repression of their own citizens while corrupt political actors and organized criminal networks have weakened democratic institutions and economic opportunities. China, Russia, and Iran have deepened their regional connections in ways that exacerbate these challenges.

The United States cannot ignore the problems plaguing its neighbors anymore. Securing our borders requires regional strategic engagement so our allies can bolster their own security and prosperity.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The Trump Administration should reinvigorate bilateral ties with regional democratic partners and engage through multilateral forums like the Organization of American States
- The administration should leverage financing mechanisms, trade agreements, and the private sector to incentivize Latin American and Caribbean countries to strengthen transparency and democracy
- The administration should expand, and Congress should fund, regional migration processing capacity in the Western Hemisphere
- The U.S. government should expand security cooperation across the hemisphere to combat human smuggling, increase public safety, and strengthen the rule of law in the region
- Congress and the Trump Administration should continue to engage with, support, and amplify the voices of democratic civil society in Latin America and the Caribbean

Millions of migrants are on the move, and the U.S. southern border dominates America's attention. People often leave their home countries because of poverty and a lack of economic opportunities, public insecurity, and natural disasters, but these factors are multiplied by things like political repression, corruption, weak institutions, and a lack of human rights protections.

[Corruption](#) in particular has insidiously and pervasively enabled bad actors in both democracies and autocracies to abuse the state apparatus for private gain, repress critics, and entrench dishonorable leaders and their loyalists in power. Systemic corruption

undermines citizen trust in institutions' effectiveness, the delivery of basic services, and the ability to protect the population from harm. Left unchecked, corruption and weak governance will undermine any U.S. efforts to cut the number of migrants trying to enter the country via irregular means.

While migration should be a key component of any regional strategy, the United States should lead on support for democratic institutions and the rule of law. Bolstering these two things can help mitigate the other problems that drive outmigration.

The Trump Administration should reinvigorate bilateral ties with regional democratic partners and engage through multilateral forums like the Organization of American States

The United States should foster regional economic opportunities and implement a proactive and comprehensive policy strategy toward Latin America and the Caribbean. This would include building stronger democratic institutions in the hemisphere that would strengthen the rule of law and reduce internal displacement that often leads to irregular migration.

President Donald Trump should prioritize visiting one or more democratic allies in Latin America or the Caribbean during the first year of his second term to demonstrate his commitment to deepening U.S. engagement. The State Department should also hold more frequent, high-level meetings with counterparts in countries beyond Mexico. The Senate should move quickly to consider executive branch nominations for diplomatic vacancies with regional partners who should be engaged on both democracy and migration. This includes ambassadors to Colombia and the Dominican Republic.

The United States should continue to support and engage through the Organization of American States (OAS) to ensure it remains the premier multilateral organization within the inter-American system. Alternative intraregional engagement forums have emerged over the past decades, but their accountability mechanisms are weak and emphasize principles such as national sovereignty over explicit commitments to preserve democracy and protect human rights. With U.S. support, the OAS has implemented initiatives to tackle the hemispheric migration crisis. They include the Working Group to Address the Venezuelan Migrant and Refugee Crisis in the Region to regularize the status of hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Costa Rica, and integrate them.

The United States must also continue to work with OAS member states to hold authoritarian actors accountable for regional instability by reinvigorating the region's commitment to upholding and enforcing the principles enshrined in the [Inter-American Democratic Charter](#). Regimes in places like Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela are major founts of outmigration. Engaging the hemisphere to restore democracy and human rights protections will also alleviate pressure caused by the mass movement of people away from repressive environments.

The administration should leverage financing mechanisms, trade agreements, and the private sector to incentivize Latin American and Caribbean countries to strengthen transparency and democracy

The United States channels development financing to countries in the Western Hemisphere through mechanisms such as the Development Finance Corporation, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and multilateral lenders such as the Inter-American Development

Bank. But current efforts are piecemeal, and the United States needs a more comprehensive strategy – one that includes new bilateral trade agreements and actively engages the U.S. private sector.

The drive to move international supply chains to the Western Hemisphere could generate much-needed economic growth in Central American and Caribbean countries. But U.S. incentive programs and private sector firms must make clear that qualifying for investment requires governments to commit to transparent governance and upholding the rule of law.

Broadening United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) renegotiations to include policy reform incentives could extend [targeted](#) or comprehensive economic growth opportunities for members of the Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR). Other countries with which the United States has bilateral trade agreements and those in the Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity could also be offered a pathway to connect with USMCA or another regional trade agreement. To ensure a level playing field, these incentives should be built on countries' demonstrated commitment to strengthening democratic institutions, transparency and accountability mechanisms, and protections for civil society.

The administration should expand, and Congress should fund, regional migration processing capacity in the Western Hemisphere

Migration is one of the most pressing issues in the United States and across the Western Hemisphere. Many come to the United States in the hope of receiving asylum – and a better life with greater opportunity – yet only a fraction will qualify. But they make the journey anyway for a chance to stay and work in the United States while waiting for asylum adjudication.

The U.S. government should expand regional processing centers that have proven effective in diverting migrants from the U.S. border and into regular migration pathways to the United States and elsewhere. The centers also combat misinformation exploited by human trafficking networks about local integration and third country resettlement options available to migrants.

Rather than doubling down on partial fixes, the United States should invest in a solution that actually keeps migrants away from the border, provides legal and humane migration options across the region, and reduces funds to international criminal organizations engaged in human smuggling.

The U.S. government should expand security cooperation across the hemisphere to combat human smuggling, increase public safety, and strengthen the rule of law in the region

International criminal organizations which smuggle human beings across the region profit from human suffering, foster insecurity, and undermine public safety. The U.S. government must continue to emphasize security cooperation with trusted regional allies who will uphold the rule of law and the dignity of the migrants but appropriately enforce local immigration laws.

Joint Task Force Alpha, which facilitates collaboration between the U.S. departments of Justice and Homeland Security and counterparts in Mexico and Northern Central America, is a recent innovation in investigating and prosecuting transnational human trafficking networks

that exploit and endanger irregular migrants. The executive branch should continue to invest in it and explore ways to expand in areas where human trafficking and smuggling networks operate.

However, the success of such an initiative also relies on the ability of investigative authorities and judicial bodies in partner countries to operate with integrity and independence from political actors and organized criminal elements who may have interests in corrupting and undermining prosecution efforts. The United States should support reforms that enhance professionalism and safeguard the independence of judiciary employees.

The United States should also encourage Latin American and Caribbean governments to strengthen their judicial systems. The lack of justice for [gender-based violence](#) victims is another major driver of migration, especially in but not limited to Central America. Support for regional governments to end impunity for perpetrators and provide a continuum of care to victims could be channeled through the State Department, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Inter-American Development Bank, as well as the private sector and nongovernmental organizations.

Congress and the Trump Administration should continue to engage with, support, and amplify the voices of democratic civil society in Latin America and the Caribbean

Civil society actors play a crucial role in improving transparency, accountability, and support for the rule of law, contributing to overall stability. Through the State Department and USAID, the U.S. government should continue to award funding to regional civil society organizations that monitor and bolster democratic governance, as well as independent media doing investigative reporting and contributing to maintaining a pluralistic information environment.

Congress should pass funding bills in a timely manner to support these activities and other federally funded grantmaking organizations that work with civil society. Congress can also elevate the visibility of civil society actors who challenge corrupt and authoritarian regimes by inviting them to testify at public hearings about disruptive dynamics that undermine stability in the hemisphere.

Civil society groups with existing capacity to combat digital disinformation could support fact-checking efforts and counter misleading information disseminated by human trafficking and smuggling networks. Additionally, donor organizations should support regional and international journalism initiatives that report on transnational corruption and kleptocracy by political actors and criminal groups. These investigations help shed light on illicit financial flows the United States and other democratic governments should shut down.

The United States cannot secure its own borders without a stable Western Hemisphere. The Trump Administration has a renewed opportunity to do this by supporting democratic accountability and strengthening of the rule of law through strategic engagement with democracies in Latin America and the Caribbean. Retreating would only yield space to foreign authoritarian adversaries and transnational criminal networks.



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