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TRUMP'S SHIFT IN IMMIGRATION STANCE ECHOES OBAMA ADMINISTRATION POLICY

Republican nominee has moved away from calling for a deportation force to expel all illegal immigrants to focusing on criminals

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For more than a year, Donald Trump has cast President Barack Obama as too lax on illegal immigration. But the Republican nominee's recent shift from calling for a deportation force to expel all illegal immigrants to focusing on criminals aligns his policy more closely with the current administration's priorities.

Mr. Obama increasingly has focused on deporting felons, gang members, suspected terrorists and recent illegal border-crossers, while seeking to defer deportations of millions of illegal immigrants with children who are U.S. citizens.

Overall, the administration has deported a record number of illegal immigrants when those apprehended at or near the border are included in the tally, though the yearly number has been declining.

"We prioritize criminals," Mr. Obama said in June after the Supreme Court blocked his plan to shield parents from deportation and give them work permits. "What we don't do is to prioritize people who've been here a long time, who are otherwise law-abiding, who have roots and connections in their communities."

Mr. Trump is under pressure to offer more details about his policies in a speech on immigration Wednesday in Phoenix, after more than a week of conflicting explanations of where he stands on deportations, from both the GOP nominee and his advisers.

"Everybody agrees we get the bad ones out," Mr. Trump said at a town hall hosted by Fox News last week, where he also suggested he would "work with" longtime residents with jobs and children, and that it would be a "very hard thing" to break up families.

"We are going to get rid of the criminals, and it's going to happen within one hour after I take office, we start to bring them back where they came from," he said Saturday while campaigning in Iowa.

During the primary, Mr. Trump said anyone who came to the U.S. illegally must leave, and called his rivals and Mr. Obama weak on illegal immigration.

"You're going to have a deportation force, and you're going to do it humanely," Mr. Trump told MSNBC in November. "We have at least 11 million people in this country that came in illegally. They will go out," he said in a February debate.

The shift in Mr. Trump's approach comes as he trails Mrs. Clinton in polling in every one of the 11 expected battleground states, though her lead in some national polls is narrowing.

Yet a tough immigration stance has been his campaign's trademark since his announcement speech in June last year when he said Mexico was sending rapists and drug dealers over the border, and attacked rivals who backed proposals to provide citizenship or some sort of legal status to illegal immigrants.

"If Trump does end up proposing that enforcement should focus on those who pose a real threat to our security or community safety, it would be highly ironic, because those were the positions he rabidly attacked when proposed by Jeb Bush and Marco Rubio, let alone the attacks he's made on the Obama administration's approach," said Janet Murguía, president of the National Council of La Raza, a Hispanic advocacy group. "We do support smart enforcement that prioritizes security but, as we know, too many families have been torn apart and whose loved ones did not meet that criterion."

About 2.7 million illegal immigrants have been expelled, from shortly before Mr. Obama took office through this month, according to Immigration and Customs Enforcement statistics. More than half of those had criminal records.

Ms. Murguía called Mr. Obama the "deporter in chief" in 2014, though she has since praised the administration for prosecutorial discretion that has scaled back deportations.

In the year ending in September 2015, 86% of the 235,413 deportations covered people dubbed "priority one" by the Department of Homeland Security: terrorism suspects, gang members, felons and illegal border crossers.

Still, illegal immigrants who don't appear to be a public safety threat get caught in the net.

Among those due to be deported by the Obama administration is Xochitl Hernandez, a Los Angeles grandmother who served one day in jail for a misdemeanor shoplifting conviction in 2004.

Ms. Hernandez, 40 years old, was arrested during a joint raid by the Los Angeles Police Department and Immigration and Customs Enforcement in East Hollywood in February. According to U.S. Department of Homeland Security deportation records, Ms. Hernandez "had several questionable tattoos" and was connected to a street gang as a "runner" for drugs for the La Mirada street gang.

The Los Angeles Police Department disputed that account, saying Ms. Hernandez wasn't a suspect in any active investigation and is not a "known gang member."

Ms. Hernandez is being held at a private prison in San Bernardino County on \$60,000 bond, which her family cannot afford, said her attorney, Jordan Cunnings.

Proponents of stricter immigration laws say the administration is ignoring too many illegal immigrants by targeting only the most violent criminals. Deportations under Mr. Obama have been falling since a peak in 2012 and reached its lowest level last year.

That gives Mr. Trump room to step up enforcement, said Jessica Vaughan, director of policy studies at the Center for Immigration Studies, which supports reduced immigration.

"The Obama administration has said publicly it is focusing on criminal aliens, but what that has meant in practice is only going after the worst of the worst," she said. "It appears that Trump would go after all of the worst. The policies that he has articulated would definitely be an improvement in public safety."

To put a human face on his immigration policy, Mr. Trump has frequently featured parents of children killed by illegal immigrants at his rallies, and he invited several to speak at the GOP convention.

Among them is Mary Ann Mendoza, whose 32-year-old son, a police officer, was killed in a 2014 car crash by an illegal immigrant driving the wrong way on an Arizona highway.

"Trump is softening the delivery, but he's not softening his stance," she said, who said she has been invited to appear on stage at Mr. Trump's rally Wednesday. "We've got a president who is allowing illegals to run amok in this country, and Trump is going to follow the law. He's not going to back down."