

# When Liberalism Fails: An Examination of U.S. Governmental Responses to Refugee Crisis

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## Abstract:

This paper examines the responses of the United States (U.S.) to the refugee crises of Syria and Venezuela respectively and compares how the immigration policies have hindered effective humanitarian settlement. While the paper takes into consideration the differences in political climates that have led to dissimilar responses among the two governments in the early stages, the study examines the consistent mismatch between the humanitarian claims and the restrictive policies enacted, highlighting their negative impact on both the population of displaced persons and the resolution of the crisis-at-large. The paper argues that the incoherency between claims and actual deeds as well as conflicts between levels of governance have rendered humanitarian responses ineffectual and even detrimental to the humanitarian conditions for the refugees. Furthermore, the paper critiques the preferential attitude held towards humanitarian aid and reveals how in both cases, such aid has crafted self-perpetuating cycles of marginalization, exploitation, and violence.

**Keywords:** Liberalism; refugee crisis; Europeanisation; solidarity.

## 1. Introduction

Displaced persons often seek resettlement in areas of higher economic development and social stability, as reflected through recent European immigration trends [1]. These trends placed developed economies in an impactful position for the prevention and intervention of refugee crises. Conventionally, a refugee crisis is regarded as one of the ripple effects of foreign socio-economic conflicts, thus independent of the will of receiving nations. However, as seen in past cases such as Germany, interethnic conflicts and violence have occurred in receiving states between domestic residents and asylum seekers [2]. While the origin of refugee crises may be external, the development, prolongation, and exacerbation of such crises are closely related to the effectiveness of the responses proposed by the receiving governments.

This study explores how the mismatch between the stated humanitarian goals and restrictive immigration policies of the U.S. in response to the Venezuelan refugee crises has impacted the humanitarian situation for refugees. As a case study, the paper employs the case of the U.S. government response to the Venezuelan refugee crisis to generalize behavioral patterns of how advanced economies, or Western liberal democracies, respond to acute influxes of displaced population.

The research first scrutinizes the actions enforced by the

U.S. government in isolation while bearing in mind the consistent themes that recur throughout the case study. It then analyzes and evaluate the responses of the U.S., focusing on how their policies and results impacted the humanitarian conditions for refugees in the region.

## 2. The U.S. Governmental Response to the Venezuelan Refugee Crisis

Although the Venezuelan refugee crisis started seven years ago, when its oil-dependent economy collapsed under falling oil prices, the after-waves of the socio-economic crisis are very much still ongoing [3]. Since 2015, more than 7.7 million Venezuelans have left the country to seek resettlement, and in December 2023, the U.S. has recorded more than 47,000 encounters with Venezuelan migrants at the U.S.-Mexican Border [4], nearly eightfold from December 2022. The increasing attempts of unauthorized border crossings by Venezuelans signify that the seven-year-long struggle is far from over: while a majority of 6.5 million of the displaced Venezuelan population currently reside in a Latin American or Caribbean state [5], recent economic downturns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted more refugees to turn to the U.S., adding further pressure on the U.S. Mexican Borders that have already been strained by the influx of refugees. The prolongation of the status quo has prompted a revision of the efficacy of existing policies, many of which were first enforced three

administrations ago during the Obama presidency.

### **2.1 Outline of the Federal Government's Response**

The most crucial element of the U.S. response to the Venezuelan refugee crisis is to decrease the number of immigrants arriving by the U.S.-Mexican border by encouraging nearby nations in Latin America and the Caribbean to accept more refugees. By dispersing the refugees across different nations, the U.S. government can avoid having to single-handedly shoulder all the burden of the crisis while providing peaceful settlements for the asylum seekers. To achieve this, the U.S. has leveraged financial aid as a means to incentivize nearby states to provide migration pathways and visas to Venezuelans while utilizing subsidiary organizations under the Federal Government, such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) to provide humanitarian aid to the refugees directly and help establish formalized integration processes in nations such as Peru, Ecuador, and Brazil [6].

As a crisis spanning three administrations, it is imperative to account for the Republican and Democratic Party's differing attitudes on immigration when observing the shifts in government response. The Obama administration from 2013-2015 primarily dealt with the Syrian Refugee Crisis, pledging to take in 10,000 Syrian refugees, half of what Maduro has offered to take into Venezuela. The succeeding Trump administration further halved this figure to 5,000 [7], reflecting an even more conservative position on immigration held by the Republican Party. A similar tight grip on immigration was also reflected in the administration's response to the Venezuelan refugee crisis, where no additional legal pathway to temporary residence or migration was offered to the asylum seekers. Moreover, the Trump administration utilized 42 U.S. Code § 265, or Title 42, under the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to provide a legal basis for the denial and expulsion of Venezuelan migrants who attempted to cross the U.S.-Mexican border since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Biden administration, which began in 2021, initially advocated for the revocation of Title 42 but later reverted to the authorization to block more than 2.3 million Venezuelan refugees from entering the country [8]. It was not until March 2021 that the Biden administration provided a special legal pathway for Venezuelans to seek refuge in the U.S. under the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) Scheme. For the roughly 1.2 million refugees who are determined to seek settlement in the U.S., the amount of TPS granted fell short of meeting its true demands: 242 thousand permits were granted in 2021 and 2021,

along with 472 thousand additional permits planned to be granted in 2023 [9], the scale of the scheme was still inadequate to respond to the ever-increasing number of migrants. This is to note, however, that within the first nine months of 2023, more than 400 thousand Venezuelan refugees have departed their original country of residence in an attempt to re-migrate to the U.S., often bearing grave risks as they trek through the Darién jungle [10]. The worsening economic situation in Latin American and Caribbean states after the pandemic, as well as the loss of job opportunities, are among the reasons that prompted a second wave of Venezuelan migration [9]. Although the Department of Homeland Security has already extended the TPS scheme for the third time in September 2023, granting employment authorization and the right to reside in the U.S. until March 2025, this only applies to refugees who have arrived prior to August 2023 and does not extend protection to any future migrants.

### **2.2 Evaluation of the U.S. Responses**

As U.S. foreign policy is primarily formulated to advance its national interests, one must first consider whether the series of responses formulated by the U.S. government was able to effectively curb the illegal immigration of Venezuelan migrants. However, since the lifting of Title 42 authorization in May 2023, the U.S. has experienced a great increase in encounters with Venezuelan refugees along its borders. The Biden administration was forced to reintroduce deportation policies in October 2023 to curb the influx of refugees, a reversal from the liberal policies that were previously advocated. Moreover, the deportation scheme, which aims to transport the refugees who have crossed the U.S. border illegally back to Venezuela, was only achieved under negotiations with the Maduro-led Venezuelan government in exchange for the partial lifting of economic sanctions against the government [11]. This move pegged the success of the U.S. response to the refugee crisis to the very government it opposes, thereby sacrificing the autonomy of U.S. policymaking when it comes to approaching U.S.-Venezuelan relations. It could almost be prophesized that this solution would not hold for long: in February 2024, the Venezuelan government halted its deal with the U.S. in response to its reimposition of economic sanctions, given that the Maduro regime has not moved towards restoring democratic processes [12]. Hence, one key marker of U.S. policy response can be seen as its inability to leverage nearby states in the Americas to coordinate an effective international response to the crisis. This is not only evident in how the U.S. approaches its relations with Venezuela but also in how the USAID programs designated to facilitate the settlement of refugees outside the U.S. were unable to provide a

strong enough incentive, which is largely pegged to the need for a sustainable source of income and access to basic social services. Although USAID has provided more than U.S.\$1.7bn to aid Venezuelans in the region [13], a 2021 internal inspector audit identified and recognized unresolved risks of aid fraud and resource waste that have impacted the effectiveness of the aid delivered [14]. This inefficacy of financial and material aid sources from the lack of strategic Frameworks to guide development programs in settlement countries such as Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru, making the survival of Venezuelan refugees in those nations dependent on U.S. aid instead of formulating a sustainable pathway to integration in those nations. Moreover, an information delta exists between USAID and the Department of State that complicates aid coordination, thereby leading to excessive waste of resources.

Such friction between government agencies does not only exist on the Federal level but is more poignantly manifested through State-State and Federal-State tensions. Southern states that constitute the nation's border with Mexico shoulder the primary burden and impact of attempted crossings made by Venezuelan refugees, and while it is the Federal Border Patrol that is primarily responsible for enforcing border policies, southern states still have to provide accommodation for the refugees that were granted the TPS. Without effective federal programs to collaborate with state governments, Republican states such as Texas have taken steps to resolve the impact of the migrant influx in isolation, namely by sending buses of migrants to Northern, Democratic states such as New York [15]. While such programs are costly and do not provide a fundamental solution to the crisis, the political subtext of such programs reveals the deep divide between party and ideological affiliation in the U.S. that has hindered the formulation of a coherent and forceful nationwide response to the imminent border crisis.

Upon scrutinizing the short-term solutions that aim to address the crisis on the border, it is also imperative to understand how the lack of a diplomatic solution with Venezuela perpetuates the refugee crisis. The trade embargos and sanctions the U.S. has enforced on Venezuela have further exacerbated its economic downturn, pushing basic services and the healthcare system within the country to collapse. The unyielding sanctions, instead of forcing the Maduro regime to change its oppressive policies, left it with no choice but to pursue a radical agenda to retain its grip on power through the assertion of authoritarian control, thus leading to a socio-economic crisis that will continue to exist until the collapse of the Maduro regime and forces many Venezuelans to seek for asylum outside of the country [16]. The maintenance of hostile relationships between the two nations would mean that the source of

the population exodus would continue to exist, rendering any aforementioned short-term solutions futile as nations and states in the Americas would have to accommodate the ever-increasing number of displaced Venezuelans.

### 3. Conclusion

The U.S. government's response to the Venezuelan refugee crisis can be observed through three main aspects: prevention of Venezuelan refugees from arriving at the U.S. border through regional cooperation, intervention along the U.S.-Mexico border through deportation and border control policies (i.e., Title 42 expulsion) to limit the entry of Venezuelan refugees into U.S. territory, and a set of foreign policy sanctions that aim to aspire political change within Venezuela to resolve the long-standing socio-economic crisis. The U.S. response is primarily led by Federal agencies, while the impacts of the refugee crisis were primarily shouldered by individual states, especially those in the south. Hence, the intended response answers the need on both a regional and national level.

The seeming failure of the U.S. response could be understood through the lack of coherent, long-term frameworks that could dynamically adjust to the influx of refugees throughout time while overly relying on short-term, fiscal solutions that merely delay the crisis at the present moment. The aid program was inefficient by nature and did not capacitate the Venezuelan emigrés from finding sustainable resettlement in nations outside the U.S., while deportation policies were hugely costly, inefficient, and damaged the humanitarian credibility of the U.S. government. The lack of close cooperation between the U.S. and other American nations, as well as between Federal government agencies, opened channels for aid fraud and resource underutilization, while the divisions that exist between individual states and the Federal government made the enforcement of nationwide policies particularly challenging. Hence, the U.S. policy response was inadequate in responding to both the regional and national demands of the crisis, while the assertive trade restrictions and strained relationships between the U.S. and Venezuela have further prolonged the crisis.

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