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ESSAY
SPECIAL SECTION

The California, US and Baja California, Mexico, Border Region in the 21st Century: Current and Future Perspectives

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This essay is part of the Special Section, ***Border Studies: Past, Present, and Future****, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Association for Borderlands Studies.*

In a democratic republic such as the United States, domestic policies and views of the border partly rest on residents' perceptions of quality of life and the security provided to them by governing institutions. The people and goods that cross borders are often blamed for society's ills, as border crossers can be seen as outsiders, free riders, or a threat to the quality of life of the community. The government's response to these concerns is based on the Hobbesian social contract (Hobbes 1994), which seeks to protect those who "belong" to the community from harm, while blaming those who are seen as "outsiders." Once it is believed that the social contract is not being honoured and the quality of life is being impacted, politicians often create domestic policies that run counter to open borders. This can be seen with the election of President Donald Trump. A major slogan of his campaign was to close the border, and even if US voters do not support many of his policies, 50% are still supportive of a closed border with Mexico if it stops undocumented crossings (The New York Times 2026). This phenomenon does not just rest with the Trump Administration, as can be seen in border and immigration policies of US presidents since the 1980s (Collins 2024).

In response to what is seen as a failure by the federal government to manage the border, US states have implemented their own initiatives to control border crossers, even though border control is part of the international policy powers of the federal government. In 2010, Arizona passed Senate Bill 1070 (SB1070), which allowed state and local police to ask for proof of citizenship during traffic stops. In 2022, during the Biden Administration, both Florida and Texas provided recent immigrants with free transportation to sanctuary cities in New York, Chicago, Washington, DC, and Denver, with no support for them when they arrived. It is estimated that over 100,000 migrants were moved to communities in these states that were far from the actual border, leaving local governments and civil society to find housing and support for them. Federal agencies sent Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Emergency Food and Shelter Program funding to the impacted cities, but many were unable to keep up with the crises created by the movement of people (Ward 2023). The situation created awareness of border policies for those living in the interior.

Border politics has thus become intertwined with the great debate in the United States around the balance of power between the states and the federal government. The lack of border or immigration policy beyond a security regime (Collins 2024) moved into the interior of the United States during the second Trump Administration. Residents of Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Portland, Chicago, and other cities across the nation demanded that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents leave their cities and called for the abolition of the agency (McFall 2026). ICE is a federal agency that borderland residents live with every day. Behind the backdrop of conflict in American cities on immigration and border policies are US–Mexican

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border communities, which are functioning the same as usual, managing with the presence of federal agents as part of their daily lives.

In border regions, perspectives on governance differ from the national political conversations. The definition of who belongs is not the same, and a pragmatic approach is taken to improve the livability of the region. This is seen in the California–Baja California border region over the past 10 years, where community leaders have been working together as the CaliBaja Megaregion (Tecma 2026). The initiative began by highlighting and increasing manufacturing and economic connections and now has strong joint activities with universities, school districts, and civic organizations from both sides of the border (The Ahlers Center for International Business 2022; CHEC 2026). A recent success for the Calibaja Higher Education Consortium (CHEC) was the opening of a special border-crossing lane for students who live in Baja California and are enrolled in higher education institutions in California. The policy is supported by the federal government but might be seen as contrary to national rhetoric. This regional work is also supported by California State Legislation Assembly Bill 91 (AB91), which allows border students to pay in-state tuition at local community colleges (Alvarez 2023). The region is building stronger connections with support from the state and federal governments.

Regional institutions need support from state and federal governing institutions (Wheeler 2009) to be successful, as seen in the California-Baja California border region. Beginning in 1982 with the Office of California–Mexico Affairs, the California–Mexico Border Relations Council was developed in 2006 with Assembly Bill 3021 (CalEPA 2026). The Council provides an annual report on activities occurring across multiple state agencies working on the border and expresses interest in managing the shared public space with Mexico. Of course, there are limits to funding for agencies working across the border, but the recognition and support of the legislature for border programming is important. Additionally, the region counts on federal government support through the La Paz Agreement programs (Collins and Coronado 2025) as well as special taxation and tourism programming set by Mexico.

What does the dichotomy of border policies from the national to the state to the regions mean for those living and working in the border regions? The US national backlash to the broken immigration system played out in American cities in 2025–26. It remains to be seen if the conflict will lead to comprehensive immigration reform for the United States. At the border, though, it is business as usual with close to US$800 million in trade moving through the border region and millions of people crossing every day (Bureau of Transportation Statistics 2026; North American Development Bank 2025). An open border in these regions is part of the fabric of society and moves beyond the rhetoric of the nation-state. This is not to say there will not be ebbs and flows to the system given economic and political considerations. But current global economic connections mandate that borders are open for trade, workers, and those permitted to travel by their governments. National governments are using technology and pre-clearance standards to facilitate the movement of people across land borders. Questions of equity in access do arise, yet the ports of entry continue to function. Additionally, coordination and cooperation continue at the federal level even though the regions don't always hear the full results from the conversations directly, but experience them at the border. This is not a new phenomenon, as we've seen with the Bush, Obama, Biden, and Trump administrations (Collins 2024). Work is done outside the public view, but it is still ongoing by necessity.

The larger question is the how, why, and where of funding public policy to improve the quality of life in border communities. The pragmatism of leadership in border regions necessitates working together, yet many agreements are informal and depend on the engagement of stakeholders and the availability of funds. Initiatives and accompanying budgets are needed to strengthen the existing informal relationships. Institutionalizing coordination and cooperation at the regional and local levels will improve livability and address critical public problems, with positive impacts seen far from the border region as well. It takes civil society, business, and public organizations coming together (Newell, 2025), as seen in the CaliBaja megaregion. There is more to be done, and this is not a new call for action. But in this time of national political turmoil, the political will at the regional level might just be strong enough to make it happen.

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