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After years on the outside, foes of legal immigration find a louder voice with Trump's election

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As a leading advocate for slashing legal immigration levels, Roy Beck has spent years on the political fringes of the debate in a country that has had dramatic growth in its foreign-born population over a half-century.

Beck is executive director of NumbersUSA, an Arlington-based nonprofit organization devoted to “stabilizing” the population. He has been marginalized in Washington as an eccentric figure whose views some consider xenophobic or even racist.

In recent weeks, though, President-elect Donald Trump's early appointments, including the nominee for attorney general and two top White House advisers, are giving Beck hope that his positions are suddenly front and center at the highest levels of government.

“We've been in the wilderness, and overnight we are not anymore,” Beck said. Trump, he added, “really did make some very strong statements about cutting immigration. That's a total change.”

Throughout Western nations, societies are reexamining the merits of immigration in the wake of a global surge of refugees, terrorist attacks and struggling economies. In the United States, President Obama has warned against an overreaction to the forces of globalization and the political and economic turmoil in the Middle East and Europe. He has referred to the United States, repeatedly, as a “nation of immigrants.”

But here, as in Europe, some of the most strident restrictionist voices have gained new political legitimacy amid a wave of populist anxiety of the kind that propelled Trump to his presidential victory.

Trump campaigned on pledges to build a border wall, deport the undocumented and ban Muslim immigrants. And during a campaign speech in Phoenix last summer, he raised the specter of new policies to curtail legal immigration, citing concerns about foreign workers taking jobs and keeping wages down for the native-born.

Trump noted that 59 million immigrants had come to the United States over the past 50 years, boosting the nation's foreign-born population share from 4.8 percent to 14 percent, according to Pew Research Center.

“Many of these arrivals have greatly enriched our country,” he said. “But we now have an obligation to them, and to their children, to control future immigration — as we have following previous immigration waves — to ensure assimilation, integration and upward mobility.”

Today, the U.S. government awards green cards to more than 1 million foreigners annually, granting them legal permanent residence. Groups such as NumbersUSA want to slash that by a half or more.

In his speech, Trump expressed a desire to cut legal immigration levels to “within historical norms,” as measured by a share of the overall population, and he proposed a new federal commission to develop proposals to achieve it.

The goal, he said, would be to “select immigrants based on their likelihood of success in U.S. society and their ability to be financially self-sufficient.” The new immigration system should establish “controls to boost wages and to ensure open jobs are offered to American workers first.”

Trump has echoed the views of Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.), who is perhaps the Senate’s most vocal immigration hard-liner and whom Trump has nominated as U.S. attorney general.

Stephen Miller, a longtime Sessions aide who wrote most of Trump’s immigration speeches, has been named senior adviser to the president for policy in the Trump White House. And Stephen K. Bannon, Trump’s chief strategist, advocated for reducing legal immigration levels as editor of Breitbart News, a conservative site that reports extensively on the issue.

“What we need now is immigration moderation: slowing the pace of new arrivals so that wages can rise, welfare rolls can shrink and the forces of assimilation can knit us all more closely together,” Sessions wrote in a Washington Post op-ed last year.

To immigrant rights advocates, such talk sounds like justification for pursuing “nativist and xenophobic” policies, said Marielena Hincapié, executive director of the National Immigration Law Center.

She pointed to academic studies showing that immigrants spur economic growth and suggested that Trump and his aides are employing a false rationale as political cover to “take us back to [the policies of] previous centuries.”

The last time the United States significantly cut immigration levels was in 1924, after a public backlash over huge spikes of foreign workers during the Second Industrial Revolution prompted Congress to establish strict quotas based on “national origin.” The new laws favored white immigrants from Northern and Western Europe, while severely restricting Jews from Southern and Eastern Europe, as well as Africans. Asians and Arabs were banned outright.

Over the ensuing decades, U.S. immigration rates plunged to their lowest levels since the pre-Civil War era — from more than 800,000 immigrants a year between 1900 and 1910 to about 70,000 a year between 1930 and 1940, according to federal data.

In 1965, Congress replaced the national-origin quota with a system focused on reuniting immigrant families that led to a massive spike in immigration levels. Under current policies,

immigrants and their descendants will account for an additional 103 million people over 50 years, 88 percent of the nation's population growth, according to Pew.

“The question is whether having an immigration level higher than any other country in the world but half of what we have now signifies any kind of qualitative change in who we are as a country,” said Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, another group that advocates for reducing immigration levels. “That 500,000 or 400,000 immigrants a year is somehow un-American, but 1 million is America.”

During unsuccessful immigration reform efforts under President George W. Bush in 2007 and Obama in 2013, Beck and Krikorian were reliable voices of opposition to bipartisan legislative proposals that featured a path to citizenship for the nation's 11 million illegal immigrants.

But to them, the fate of the undocumented — which has become the major flash point on Capitol Hill — obscures their more fundamental goal of reducing overall immigration flows. A third major restrictionist group, the Federation for American Immigration Reform, has spent decades lobbying Congress to cap immigration at 300,000 per year.

All three organizations were started with funding from John Tanton, a Michigan doctor who has professed support for eugenics, the pseudoscience claiming that some racial groups are inherently superior.

But Beck rejected as “nonsense” the notion that his group's views are based on race.

“It is nationalist, not nativist,” he said. “It's not where you were born, but are you a member of this national community?”

NumbersUSA touts as its spiritual godmother the late Barbara Jordan, a Texas Democrat who was the first African American woman elected to Congress from the Deep South. In the mid-1990s, before her death in 1996, Jordan chaired a bipartisan federal commission that recommended to the Clinton administration cutting annual green cards from 675,000 a year to 550,000. Clinton never moved forward on the proposal.

In an ad that aired during the Republican and Democratic presidential primary debates last year, NumbersUSA featured a clip of Jordan's testimony that “the commission finds no national interest in continuing to import lesser-skilled and unskilled workers to compete in the most vulnerable parts of our labor force.”

Studies have shown that immigrants who arrive legally boost the economy over the long term and that many have higher levels of education than native-born Americans.

Proponents of lowering immigration levels “are just interested in coming up with reasons not to have people who are different,” said Stuart Anderson, an adjunct scholar at the conservative Cato Institute who served as counselor to the commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service under Bush.

Anderson said the 1924 law that slashed immigration rates was “hardly a model of good governance. It was one of the ugliest periods of the eugenics movement and extremely anti-Semitic.”

Trump advisers emphasized that limiting immigration would benefit all American workers, including blacks and Hispanics.

One aide said the president-elect has not specified a target immigration level because he wants to consult members of Congress. The aide — who spoke on the condition of anonymity to address the debate because he was not authorized to talk about the issue on the record — said Trump favors a revamped system that would prioritize immigrants with high education levels and expertise in high-skilled industries such as technology.

The 1965 immigration act sought to build in preferences for skilled foreign laborers, but the system overwhelmingly favors family reunification. Of the 1 million foreigners granted permanent legal residence in 2014, 647,000 — about two-thirds — received green cards based on family ties, according to the Department of Homeland Security. Just 152,000 permanent arrivals were employment-based.

In addition, 134,000 refugees and asylum seekers received green cards, and 54,000 more were distributed in an annual diversity lottery for underrepresented countries, many in Africa.

Critics have said the rules encourage “chain migration,” the tradition of immigrants seeking to bring extended family members. The Trump aide cited as a model Canada’s system of awarding points to immigrants based on education, job skills, language proficiency, age and other criteria.

If he pursues a legislative push, Trump is likely to run into major resistance, including from some fellow Republicans and members of the business community, which has supported more-robust programs for foreign workers and their families.

But Beck said he is counting on Trump.

“We have a citizen army,” said Beck, whose group has more than 6 million Facebook followers. “We will be acting and pushing members of Congress. We’re not going into this expecting him to disappoint us.”