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Trump wants to shut down immigration to slow the coronavirus and protect American jobs. Here's how that could backfire

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President Donald Trump's plan to suspend immigration to the United States amid the coronavirus pandemic could affect thousand of relatives of U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents.

Trump says he wants to suspend immigration to help slow the spread of the coronavirus and protect the jobs of U.S. citizens. But it's unlikely a sweeping immigration ban would mitigate the outbreak. And some critics say such a ban could hurt American workers by stifling the economy. Suspending immigration almost certainly would also be met by legal challenges.

"In light of the attack from the Invisible Enemy, as well as the need to protect the jobs of our GREAT American Citizens, I will be signing an Executive Order to temporarily suspend immigration into the United States!" Trump posted Monday on Twitter.

Trump's tweet was quickly praised by supporters of less immigration and condemned by immigration advocates.

On Tuesday, Trump clarified that he wants a 60-day suspension of the issuance of green cards, not on temporary workers.

"By pausing immigration we'll help put unemployed Americans first in line for jobs as America reopens, so important," Trump said at the White House, according to the Associated Press. "It would be wrong and unjust for Americans laid off by the virus to be replaced with new immigrant labor flown in from abroad."

Roy Beck, president of NumbersUSA, an immigration restrictionist group, said before Trump's clarification on Tuesday that to suspend immigration makes sense with so many Americans forced out of work because of government orders for people to stay at home to slow the spread of the deadly contagious coronavirus, which causes a disease called COVID-19.

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"With tens of millions of Americans who want to work full-time unable to do so, most immigration at this moment makes no sense, and the President appears to be moving in the right direction to curtail it." [Beck wrote in a blog post.](#)

Beck said the move to suspend immigration appears in line with public opinion, citing polling conducted April 9-10 by USA TODAY/Ipsos that found that 79% of Americans support a temporary ban on immigration because of the coronavirus situation.

On the other side of the immigration divide, Frank Sharry, founder and executive director of America's Voice, a pro-immigration advocacy group, accused Trump of scapegoating immigrants to divert attention away from his handling of the coronavirus crisis and to shore up support from his base as the presidential race heats up.

"The President is failing. Americans are dying. He has no plan. He is doing too little too late on testing. He is responding to the worst crisis in our lifetime with spin, bluster, lies and self-congratulation," Sharry said in a written statement. "What does he do? What he always does. He divides to distract. He blames immigrants, most of whom are people of color. He strains to deflect from his abject failure. He focuses on mobilizing white grievance voters."

The details of Trump's executive order haven't been released, but here is what putting a temporary halt to immigration could mean.

A suspension of all immigration to the U.S. would affect millions

Pausing the issuance of green cards could affect many thousands of relatives of U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents, said David Bier, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

About 700,000 people come to the U.S. as immigrants to live permanently in the U.S. after being sponsored by close relatives who are U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents, Bier said. They include parents, spouses children, siblings, and spouses of U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents. Many of them have waited years and sometimes decades for green cards, as permanent residency visas are known.

The U.S. also grants about 140,000 green cards to workers who have been sponsored by employers, but only about 10,000 of those workers are newly arriving from other countries. The rest already are living in the U.S. on temporary worker visas.

in addition, tens of millions of people from other countries travel to the U.S. annually as tourists or for business, Bier said. But they apparently would not be affected by the pause in green cards Trump wants.

The exact number is difficult to calculate because while the U.S. issues 5 to 6 million tourist visas a year, there are tens of millions of people who enter each year who don't need a visa because they come from countries waived from visas by the U.S., Bier said. Those include countries such as Canada, Japan, Australia and the many countries in Europe.

Also apparently untouched would be the 750,000 come to the U.S. each year for work purposes, including those who come through a wide range of work visas for seasonal agriculture workers, seasonal non-agriculture workers, and high-skilled H1-B workers, or through temporary exchange work programs.

In addition, about 300,000 people come to the U.S. each year from other countries to study, Bier said.

Rounding out the other large groups of people who come to the U.S. each year but apparently would not be affected are the 10,000 immigrants who arrive each year on visas for people who have invested between \$900,000 and \$1.8 million in a U.S. business, and another 50,000 people who come to the U.S. through a diversity lottery program for immigrants from countries who don't send many immigrants to the U.S.

Under a cap set by the Trump administration in 2019, the U.S. is also slated to receive up to 18,000 refugees in 2020.

Immigration to the U.S. already has mostly come to a standstill

Bier said an executive order suspending immigration is not needed because most immigration to the U.S. has already come to a standstill after the State Department closed down embassies and consulates to protect workers from being exposed to the coronavirus or spreading it.

As a result, most visas for visitors and immigrants trying to come to the U.S. are not being processed or approved, he said.

"We are already under a de facto ban on all new immigrants, students, guest workers and the like because the State Department has closed down embassies and consulates all around the world," Bier said.

Trump already temporarily suspended travel from some countries because of the coronavirus

After the coronavirus was detected in Wuhan, China, the Trump administration on Jan. 31 suspended travel for all foreign nationals from China to the U.S. The administration later expanded the travel ban to Europe, Iran, the United Kingdom and Ireland, according to the Migration Policy Institute.

In mid-March, the U.S. closed borders with Mexico and Canada to nonessential travel.

The U.S. has never officially halted immigration before

Even during the two world wars and the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic, the United States allowed immigrants to keep coming, Bier said.

During World War II, about 100,000 immigrants arrived in the U.S.

Another 250,000 immigrants permanently settled in the U.S. between 1918 and 1919 during the Spanish Flu pandemic, which killed at least 50 million people worldwide, including 650,000 people in the U.S. according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"I guess the closest parallel would be day after 9/11, when there was a one-day hiatus of all air traffic and basically closure of the border. But that was a day. So, not a great comparison," Bier said.

The U.S. also greatly reduced visa processing after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., and suspended the refugee program. "But in terms of an event that led to just massive reductions in immigration, ... we have never seen anything like that," he said.

Trump may not have the power to suspend immigration

In 2018, the Supreme Court in a 5-4 ruling upheld the Trump administration's controversial travel ban, which suspended the issuance of immigrant and non-immigrant visas to applicants from Libya, Iran, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, North Korea and Venezuela.

But it took the Trump administration three attempts to win the Supreme Court's approval, so implementing a sweeping suspension of immigration could be even more difficult, said Stephen Yale-Loehr, an immigration law professor at Cornell University Law School.

"It all depends on the scope of the executive order," Yale-Loehr said. "The Supreme Court upheld President Trump's travel ban, but it took them three tries before the courts finally said it was legal. They had to provide justification as to why they were denying entry from certain countries.

"It's one thing to require increased vetting of immigrants to make sure they are not carrying the coronavirus, but it's another to ban every foreign national on the fallacious theory that they automatically are sick with COVID-19," Yale-Loehr said.

He said Trump's executive order likely would be challenged by U.S. citizens whose relatives would no longer be able to enter the U.S. under the suspension.

"They would argue that their First Amendment rights of freedom to associate with their loved ones is being violated because of this suspension," he said.

In addition, an executive order broadly suspending immigration would likely face legal challenge in court on the grounds that the law that gives the president authority to suspend travel has limits.

"This goes behind what Congress intended when it gave the president discretion to suspend certain immigrants in crisis," he said.

Suspending immigration may not work as intended

Trump says he wants to suspend immigration to battle the spread of the coronavirus. As of April 21, there were at least 823,257 confirmed coronavirus cases in the U.S. and 44,805 deaths, according to data compiled by John Hopkins University.

Bier at the Cato Institute said research shows that travel bans don't work after an outbreak has already spread. Suspending immigration also could hurt American workers by stifling the economy when it begins to reopen once the crisis subsides.

"Employers don't care where employees are born. They are just trying to fill a job and get as much production as possible out of that position," Bier said. "So by delaying hiring of people, you ultimately reduce the productivity of American companies which delays economic growth and the recovery.

"You do not want to delay companies getting back on line in any way because that has a much more harmful effect on American workers than anything else."