



Trump's 'Public Charge' Rule May Curb California's Upward Naturalization Trend

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While California's population saw its slowest growth in decades last year, the number of immigrants arriving and staying in the Golden State continue to grow, keeping its population up and making it the state with the largest number of immigrants-turned-citizens in the nation.

But what happens when an unrestricted number of foreign-born residents swells the welfare system?

In 2017, nearly twice as many people became citizens in California than New York, the state with the second most naturalized citizens, according to government data (pdf). The numbers show that 37 percent of the more than 700,000 people who obtained citizenship in the United States in 2017 were born in North America, with 17 percent of the total hailing from Mexico.

After the Trump administration's Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced the new "public charge" rule, which makes immigrants who use welfare benefits less likely to be eligible for citizenship, many criticized the president.

In a statement, National Immigration Law Center's executive director Marielena Hincapieé said that the nonprofit would be challenging the new rule in court.

"[Public charge rules] will have a dire humanitarian impact, forcing some families to forego critical life-saving health care and nutrition," she wrote. "The damage will be felt for decades to come."

And in an article for the libertarian Cato Institute, immigration policy analyst David Bier wrote that the administration's new rule is "designed to exclude immigrants regardless of the degree to which they are supporting themselves and contributing positively to the economy." In the end, he added, the "DHS actually made the final rule worse than the proposed rule."

But the heart of the rule change is more about targeting immigrants who aren't standing "on their own two feet," as Ken Cuccinelli, the acting director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, put it. The new rule changes how the DHS deals with green card and other types of visa applicants and may deny entry or citizenship to those who might become dependent on government assistance.

These changes, senior advisor for the Washington, D.C.-based Heritage Foundation Mike Howell told The Epoch Times, will surely change California's naturalization trend.

By expanding the public charge definition from those who rely on cash assistance to anyone who receives Medicaid, housing subsidies such as Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers, Section 8 Project-Based Rental Assistance, and Public Housing programs, or food stamps, the administration "could categorically remove eligibility for citizenship to all the people who are going to California who rely on those programs," Howell said.

Considering that more immigrants stay in California because of the state's taxpayer-backed generosity toward foreigners, Howell told The Epoch Times in a phone interview, the Golden State will definitely see a drop in its naturalization rate in the long run.

"California is going to have to look at how they can change their welfare state systems to comply with the rule." And once these changes are implemented, fewer immigrants will be eligible for naturalization.

But since this is all theoretical thus far, Howell added, it remains to be seen as the state would have "to work around public charge [rules]" to keep its naturalization rates high.

"[California is] very dependent on federal resources, [especially] in this welfare area so this could have a huge impact [on immigration] numbers," he said. "A lot of [immigrants] have been using these programs so they will find themselves ineligible for citizenship."

But while California may fear losing their federally-backed perks if they stand to Trump, Howell argued, California has a long road toward compliance. In the end, the state might try to simply ignore the new rules, even if the state can no longer afford giving immigrants public benefits.

"It all depends on how it's enforced," Howell said. "[If] someone who's here illegally and is denied public charge [in California,] what happens when you try to remove them? [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] still has very little resources when it comes to removing folks and California does not cooperate at all. ... The state government is very antagonistic toward the president and law enforcement in general."

And when illegal immigrants can't be removed or can't be kept from having access to public benefits, Howell argued, they become a drain on the system.

"These numbers should be shocking to everyone, just the size and scope of our current [immigration] crisis. Our systems, our social services are overwhelmed by demands being put on them by illegal immigrants and I think that the administration is doing everything within its power to preserve these benefits to actual citizens of this country."

However, Howell added, changing the public charge rule won't be enough. What's needed instead is cooperation, he said. Developing "partnerships between the countries in Central and North America" is the only way to "stem this [immigrant] flow."

"It needs to be done, because right now, at this rate, we will not be able to afford [future welfare programs]."

