Trump wants to cut family-based immigration. The results would be seismic.

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First lady Melania Trump's immigrant parents are now U.S. citizens.

Viktor and Amalija Knavs, who are originally from Slovenia, took the citizenship oath in August at a federal building in Manhattan.

They benefited from exactly the form of family-based immigration that President Donald Trump, their son-in-law, wants to sharply curtail.

Under the system, U.S. citizens can petition for their closest relatives to get green cards. Then, after waiting several years, the relatives can apply to become full-fledged citizens.

In the Knavses' case, their daughter, Melania Trump, a U.S. citizen, reportedly petitioned for them to receive green cards, and they in turn were able to apply for citizenship.

For generations, family reunification has been the cornerstone of the U.S. immigration system under the guiding principle that immigrants assimilate better when they have the support of their families.

But Trump derisively calls the nation's family-based immigration system "chain migration." He has fought to replace it with a merit-based system that largely grants green cards to immigrants based on their abilities instead of their family ties.

Trump's position puts him at odds with the Knavses' New York City-based immigration lawyer, Michael Wildes, who believes curtailing family-based immigration would be a mistake.

"I think it's foolhardy," Wildes told *The Arizona Republic* and USA TODAY NETWORK. The United States, he said, already has a merit-based system that allows immigrants with exceptional talent and skill to receive green cards.

What's more, many of the immigrants who come to the United States through the current family-based system are also highly educated.

"The greatest workers we have are given greater incentive if their family members are allowed to join them in the United States," Wildes said. "The greatest risk-takers in the world have been foreign nationals that eventually become citizens themselves.

"They will work so much harder knowing that their loved ones are either en route or by their side, and this has been the hallmark of our family unification that our founding fathers envisioned."

Wildes detests the term "chain migration."

"The notion of chain migration, you think of monkeys in a jungle," he said. "It's such a derogatory term that is demoralizing of a beautiful principle."

Trump has pushed to make major cuts to the nation's long-standing family-based immigration system.

Under a four-pillar plan he outlined during his State of the Union address in January, Trump called for ending "chain migration."

President Donald Trump outlined a 4-pillar immigration plan during his first State of the Union speech on January 30, 2018.

"Under the current broken system, a single immigrant can bring in virtually unlimited numbers of distant relatives," Trump said.

Instead of the ability to sponsor parents, siblings, children, and spouses, immigrants who become citizens or legal permanent residents would be limited to sponsoring only their spouses and minor children for green cards, under Trump's plan.

Earlier this year, Trump's insistence that cuts to family immigration be part of any DACA deal helped derail efforts in the Senate to pass legislation aimed at legalizing "dreamers" — undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children.

About 690,000 dreamers are now temporarily shielded from deportation under the Obama-era Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. Trump tried to rescind the program as of March 5 until three federal judgesin separate rulingstemporarily blocked him from doing so.

Negotiations over DACA remain stalled in Congress, and almost certainly won't come up again until after the midterm elections because lawmakers are reluctant to touch such a hot-button issue while campaigning for re-election, said Sarah Pierce, a policy analyst at the nonpartisan think tank Migration Policy Institute.

Meanwhile, a Texas judge could rule any day to kill the DACA program entirely. That could push Congress to restart negotiations over a program to legalize DACA recipients after the midterm elections. If so, Trump seems determined not to sign any DACA deal unless it also includes cuts to family-based immigration, Pierce said.

"This vital reform is necessary, not just for our economy, but for our security, and our future," Trump said earlier this year.

How big are Trump's proposed cuts to immigration?

Enormous.

The United States gives out about 1 million green cards a year. In 2016, 34 percent went to immigrants already in the United States and 66 percent went to new arrivals. There are two main ways for immigrants to come to the United States: the family-based system and the employment-based system.

The bulk, however, come through the family-based system. In 2016, 1.2 million immigrants received green cards, as legal permanent residency visas are known.

Of those, 804,793, or about two-thirds, received green cards through the family-based immigration system, compared with 137,893, or 12 percent, through the employment-based system, U.S. Department of Homeland Security data show. Refugees, 10 percent; diversity visa lottery winners, 4 percent; and asylees, 3 percent, received most of the remaining green cards.

Under Trump's plan, 317,661 of the family-based green cards would be eliminated based on an analysis of 2016 databy Julia Gelatt and Sarah Pierce at the Migration Policy Institute. That amounts to a 40 percent reduction in family-based green cards, and a 27 percent reduction in overall immigration.

The 317,661 family-based green cards that would be cut break down like this, according to the institute:

- Parents of U.S. citizens: 173,854.

- Adult or married children of U.S. citizens: 49,464.

- Adult or married children of legal permanent residents: 26,987.

- Siblings of adult U.S. citizens: 67,356.

Which family members would be barred?

Under Trump's plan, only spouses and minor children would be eligible for green cards.

The current family-based system allows U.S. citizens to sponsor minor children, unmarried and married adult children, as well as their own spouses, parents, and siblings.

Also, legal permanent residents can also sponsor family members, but they are limited to spouses, minor children and unmarried adult children.

Spouses, parents and minor children are currently given preference over other family members.

U.S. citizens can't directly sponsor nieces and nephews. But when a U.S. citizen sponsors a sibling, that person is allowed to bring his or her spouse and children — the sponsor's nieces and nephews — through what are called "derivative" green cards. Immigrants who receive green cards through family sponsorships can then sponsor their own family members.

This is what Trump refers to as "chain migration."

Can immigrant family members come all at once?

Yes and no.

Immediate family members of U.S. citizens — parents, spouses and unmarried minor children — can get green cards almost immediately, after they go through the application process, which typically takes about six months.

Siblings, and adult children of U.S. citizens, and spouses and children of legal permanent residents, have to wait until a green card is available based on preference categories. That can take years, and sometimes decades, depending on the category.

The wait is because of limits the United States sets on the overall number of green cards available each year, and the number it grants per country.

Sponsorship of nonimmediate family members — siblings, adult children, and married children of U.S. citizens, and spouses and all children of legal permanent residents — are subject to a limit of 226,000 visas total per year. On top of that, no more than 7 percent of the total number of visas can go to individuals from a single country.

As a result, some family members wait years, sometimes decades, for a green card. Siblings wait the longest. For example, the current wait for a sibling from China and India is about 14 years; from Mexico, it's 21 years; and from the Philippines, it is 24 years, according to the State Department's most recent Visa Bulletin.

Why cut family-based immigration?

Trump wants to slash family-immigration green cards as part of his "America First" credo.

He says the family-based immigration system is outdated and allows too many immigrants into the United States based solely on family ties, resulting in high numbers of lower-skilled immigrants who compete with American workers. He wants to introduce a points-based system modeled after countries such as Canada and Australia that he says would better benefit the economy.

He also says the family-based system, along with the Diversity Visa Lottery Program, makes it easier for terrorists to get in.

During his State of the Union address, Trump referenced as examples two alleged ISIS sympathizers.

Akayed Ullah, a Bangladesh immigrant accused of detonating a bomb in December in a crowded New York City subway, entered the United States after his parents received sibling green cards.

Sayfullo Saipov, a Uzbekistan immigrant accused of plowing a pickup down a crowded bike path in Manhattan in October, entered the United States through the Diversity Visa Lottery Program, which Trump also wants to eliminate. That program allows immigrants from countries with lower rates of immigration to get green cards.

Would Trump's plan boost the economy?

No, according to a study of the RAISE Act by the Penn Wharton Budget Model, at the University of Pennsylvania.

Trump has endorsed the RAISE Act, pending in the U.S. Senate and introduced by Sens. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., and David Perdue, R-Ga.

The legislation would reduce overall immigration by slashing family-based immigration, eliminating the Diversity Visa Lottery Program, and restricting the number of refugees into the United States.

As it reduces overall immigration, the legislation would alsoincrease the share of high-skilled immigrants by introducing a merit-based system that awards points to potential immigrants who have certain characteristics, such as a high-paying job offer and the ability to speak English.

According to the Penn Wharton Budget Model, the RAISE Act would reduce GDP by 0.7 percent by 2027, and reduce jobs by 1.3 million. By 2040, GDP would be about 2 percent lower and about 4.6 million jobs would be lost.

How old is the family-based immigration system?

It has been around for decades.

The principle of family unification has been part of U.S. immigration law at least since 1921, when the Emergency Quota Law was enacted, according to a 2014 report by the Congressional Research Service. The law for the first time introduced restrictions on the total number of immigrants allowed into the United States based on national origin but exempted the minor children of U.S. citizens.

Family unification was further promoted under the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act, which created the current system giving preference to certain relatives over others.

The Immigration and National Act of 1965 completely eliminated the national origins quota system, which was viewed as discriminatory, and gave full priority to immigrants with family members already living in the United States.

Following the 1965 law, immigration to the United States shifted from mostly Europe to Latin America and Asia. Europeans made up 56 percent of the immigrants admitted in the 1950s, compared to 13 percent in the 2000s, according to the Congressional Research Service report. Latin American immigration increased from 23 percent to 41 percent and from Asia it jumped from 5 percent to 41 percent.

Trump's plan to cut family-based green cards would have banned a third of the almost 40 million immigrants allowed into the United States since 1965, an analysis by David Bier at the libertarian think tank Cato Institute shows.