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Trump's approach to screening immigrants only leaves the U.S. worse off

Editorial Board

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THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION'S new approach to screening immigrants seeking visas or permanent legal residency won't attract greater numbers of better-heeled, success-bound applicants. But it will radically slash the total number of immigrants gaining legal admission. And it will deprive the U.S. economy of badly needed workers of the sort who have a long track record of upward mobility.

The administration's policy, unveiled Monday, establishes regulations that officials could use to deny green cards, which confer legal permanent residency, to hundreds of thousands of migrants annually. It would do so based on a set of arbitrary criteria purported to predict their future affluence.

It's a reasonable goal to deny green cards to immigrants who are likely to depend heavily on public benefits and impose a long-term burden on taxpayers. For the past two decades, the law has done just that by excluding immigrants likely to become "public charges," defined mainly as those dependent on government cash welfare benefits.

The trouble with the administration's new blueprint is that it would also penalize those deemed likely to partake legally of noncash benefits — including housing assistance, food stamps and Medicaid — even if the benefits amounted to a small share of their income over a relatively short period of time. Migrants whose English proficiency, educational attainment or bank balances were judged inadequate could be denied green cards even if bureaucrats predicted they would receive a public benefit for just 12 months in a given future three-year period.

That stance, a drastic shift in this nation's long-standing approach to legal immigrants, is based on scant evidence. A survey by the Cato Institute found immigrants are less likely to live on government handouts than native-born Americans. Legal immigrants tend to be as likely or more so to have jobs as native-born Americans, and surveys show they pay more in state and local taxes than they receive in benefits.

By giving preference to green-card and visa applicants with fat wallets, private health insurance and substantial assets, the administration's new rules would favor visa and green-card applicants from European and other wealthy countries. That's a policy preference with long-standing roots in U.S. history, and one President Trump himself endorsed last year by expressing the wish for more immigrants from Norway.

The fact remains that less-well-heeled immigrants fill jobs for which there are insufficient native-born applicants; they perform well in those jobs and move up the income bracket. The

administration's new rules, while complex — they exempt pregnant women, asylum seekers, refugees, military service personnel and others — would drastically expand the pool of those who could be denied legal permanent residency based on poor predictors of future success.

Ken Cuccinelli, acting director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, said the country would continue to welcome immigrants who could pull themselves “up by their bootstraps.” Unfortunately, the effect of the new policy would be to exclude those very bootstrappers.