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## The Trump administration's new green-card rule could be 'a backdoor' to immigration reform, experts say

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August 13, 2019

- The Trump administration announced a sweeping rule change on Monday to make it harder for immigrants using or deemed likely to use public benefits, such as food stamps, housing vouchers, and Medicaid, to obtain a green card and American citizenship.
- It was emblematic of the administration's yearslong effort to erect additional bureaucratic hurdles in the US immigration process.
- Immigration experts say the change could help overhaul the nation's immigration laws by prioritizing wealthier, better-educated immigrants over those with low incomes.

The Trump administration announced a sweeping rule change on Monday to make it harder for immigrants using or deemed likely to use public benefits, such as food stamps, housing vouchers, or Medicaid, to obtain a green card and American citizenship. The rule change was emblematic of the administration's yearslong effort to erect additional bureaucratic hurdles in the US immigration process.

Politico said completing and issuing the new rule has been a top priority for White House officials, who are determined to vastly remake the nation's immigration laws to stem the flow of legal and illegal immigration to the US.

Taking effect in mid-October, the new "public-charge" rule would effectively allow the government to press that immigrants allowed into the US are self-sufficient.

Acting US Citizenship and Immigration Services Director Ken Cuccinelli said the goal is bring "people to join us as American citizens, as legal permanent residents first, who can stand on their own two feet, who will not be reliant on the welfare system, especially in the age of the modern welfare state which is so expansive and expensive."

But immigration experts say the change could jump-start a shift in the nation's immigration laws by prioritizing wealthier, better-educated immigrants over those with low incomes.

The senior Migration Policy Institute analyst Julia Gelatt told INSIDER that the rule change would give immigration authorities "a lot of discretion" to determine who is likely to use government benefits in the future, since they would be in charge of assessing an immigrant's English skills, education, and income, among other factors. "This could have really strong implications of who we let into the country as immigrants," she said.

Depending on how the rule is implemented, "it may play out like backdoor immigration reform," Gelatt told INSIDER.

This was echoed by Bob Greenstein, the president of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, who told ABC News the change "essentially puts a price tag on obtaining lawful permanent residency in the United States, shifting it away from family-based immigration toward one restricted to people who are already relatively well-off or highly skilled when they enter the country."

The bedrock of the American immigration system for decades has been its emphasis on family-based admissions. But President Donald Trump earlier this year proposed realigning its focus to merit-based immigration, which would make it easier for immigrants with more means to get a US residency and eventually American citizenship — but the proposal didn't get far in Congress.

The face of American immigration has changed extensively over the past decade. Recent arrivals since the Great Recession are likely to be from Asia, particularly China and India. That's compared with Mexican immigrants, who represented the biggest drop of all immigration groups coming to the US.

Within the US, immigrants are also less likely to use public benefits compared with native-born citizens, according to the Cato Institute.

A Migration Policy Institute analysis of the proposed rule change released last year found immigrants from Mexico and Central America would be at a significantly higher risk of having their green cards rejected compared with immigrants from other regions of the world. Those from Europe, Canada, and Oceania were the least likely to be negatively affected.

There are already signs that this is playing out. Politico recently reported that between October 1 and July 29, the State Department issued 12,179 visa rejections on public-charge grounds. Around 43% of them affected Mexican nationals.

That's up from 1,033 overall rejections in the 2016 fiscal year, the last year under former President Barack Obama.