Other Views: Trump's backward view of immigration

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Congress now appears likely to reach a budget deal to keep the government functioning without treating as bargaining chips hundreds of thousands of young undocumented immigrants brought to the United States when they were children. It also appears, though, that President Trump will consider undoing his threat of deportation for these young "Dreamers" only if Congress considers the first deep cuts to legal immigration since the 1920s.

The changes the president is demanding stem from a nativist, zero-sum view that what's good for immigrants is bad for America. That view runs counter not just to the best of American tradition and principles, but to evidence of what's best for the country.

The programs targeted by Trump are designed to make legal immigration more diverse and humane. One is the lottery system that offers the chance for visas to people from countries that are underrepresented as sources of American immigrants; the other is family-based immigration, which offers visas to close relatives of citizens and legal residents.

Trump, who has regularly smeared immigrants as terrorists and criminals, has lately been focusing his fear-mongering on the diversity visa program. Last month, his Department of Homeland Security released a report that dishonestly claimed that those who entered the country via the lottery were more likely to be tied to terrorist attacks. The Cato Institute found that lottery visa holders actually killed only eight of 3,037 Americans murdered by foreign-born terrorists since 1975. The immigrants chosen in the lottery, moreover, are not chosen "without any regard for skill, merit or the safety of our people," as Trump said in his State of the Union address. They must have at least a high school education or two years of experience in skilled work, and they must also undergo criminal, national security and medical checks. The 50,000 recipients of the visas are not guaranteed permanent residence, only a chance at getting through the rest of the immigration process.

Trump has said that the family reunification program — which he and other immigration opponents prefer to call "chain migration" — opens the floodgates to "virtually unlimited numbers of distant relatives." In fact, relatives other than spouses, parents and minor children are subject to annual caps and country quotas, so that, today, the backlog is almost four million applicants, most of them facing many years of waiting to get a visa. Trump would allow no new applicants other than immediate family members, and even these would no longer include parents. Imposing these restrictions and ending the diversity visa lottery would cut in half the number of legal immigrants.

It is hard to gauge how much of what Trump says is meant as a scare tactic and how much he really will demand. The one notion that runs through all he says or tweets about immigration is that it is a door for criminals and terrorists to enter the United States. Yet data studied by the

Cato Institute indicates that diversity-visa holders and illegal immigrants, the groups most maligned by Trump, are far less prone to crime than native-born Americans.

There are questions worth examining and debating about whether the United States ought to admit more skilled immigrants and what criteria it uses to screen applicants. But such a debate can't unfold in the shadow of Trump's threat to imminently expel the Dreamers. So what is Trump really after?