



What Is Trump's Immigration Agenda?

Some immigration advocates fear the president-elect will target half-century-old changes made by LBJ.

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President-elect Donald Trump's fixation with immigration suggests that he may have aspirations beyond deporting as many as 11 million undocumented US residents, building a wall along the southern border and barring Muslims from entering the country.

Why make a big fuss when the number of people without papers, especially those from Mexico, is declining? The Obama administration has deported a record 2.5 million people. Only 10,000 Syrian refugees have settled here, a tiny sliver of the roughly 11 million Syrians (about half the nation's pre-war population) who have fled their homes. The Trump team's fierce rhetoric and its resonance with his supporters, some immigrant rights advocates suspect, have less to do with illegal immigration than the legal variety.

"They tapped into the anxiety over the growing diversity of the US," said Douglas Rivlin, communications director for Rep. Luis Gutierrez (D-IL), one of the leading advocates for more liberal immigration laws.

Since 1965, when President Lyndon Johnson and significant bipartisan majorities in both the House and the Senate overhauled US immigration laws to eliminate quotas that favored northern Europeans, the nation's immigrant population has more than quadrupled. America is home to 45 million foreign-born residents, three-quarters of whom have become citizens, have permanent residents or have valid visas. The vast majority of these new Americans hail from somewhere other than Europe.

In late August, in what he billed as a major address on immigration in Phoenix, Trump noted how many immigrants have arrived since the landmark 1965 immigration bill and called for keeping "immigration levels measured by population share within historical norms."

Legal immigration, far more than the unauthorized kind, has altered the demographics of nation: Today, a majority of US toddlers are non-white, according to the Census. Whites stand to lose their majority status by 2042. One sign that this transformation reverberated in the election:

White voters were more likely to support Trump when they heard about that outlook, a team of University of California at Santa Barbara and Stanford researchers found.

“Trump’s more explicit anti-immigrant and anti-diversity rhetoric and policies, relative to the other candidates, makes him especially appealing” to people whose “ethnic identity as white (is) an important part of their self-concept,” researchers Brenda Major, Alison Blodorn and Gregory Major Blascovich wrote.

As Brian Keith Patterson, a white machinist and Hendersonville, North Carolina voter, put it more plainly in an ABC News interview: “I’m not afraid to say that I’m in fear for the white man. I’m in fear.”

Final numbers regarding turnout won’t be available for a few more weeks, but according to CNN exit polling, Trump swept 58 percent of the white vote overall, and 72 percent of the ballots cast by white men without college degrees.

Which is why many people of color, non-Christians, and other historically marginalized groups feel threatened by Trump’s win. “This was a whitelash against a changing country” with a black president, said CNN commentator Van Jones, a political and environmental activist. “We don’t want to feel that someone has been elected by throwing away some of us to appeal more deeply to others.”

Fueling that concern: The prominent presence on Trump’s team of advisers who have long sought to restrict *legal* as well as undocumented immigration, and who have characterized the nation’s ongoing demographic transformation as an existential crisis.

Most notably, Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-AL) helped Trump shape his immigration policies as a top national security adviser. Sessions’ hardline anti-immigration positions and his own (he prosecuted civil rights activists while serving a federal prosecutor) used to relegate him to a largely fringe role in Congress. Not only does he oppose all pathways to legal status for unauthorized immigrants, he also wants to reduce the number of immigrants granted authorization each year. Trump put Sessions, the first sitting senator to endorse him during the primaries, on his shortlist for potential running mates and *Politico* reports that the Alabamian is a contender for the Trump administration’s defense secretary. Sessions also accompanied Trump to Mexico for that impromptu meetup with Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto.

Sessions is a “major politician, and let me tell you, he is highly respected in Washington because he’s as smart as you get,” Trump said in his 3 a.m. victory speech.

Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, author of Arizona’s “papers please” SB 1070 and other similar statutes picked up by other states and local governments, was also an early Trump endorser. Kobach claimed credit for the Republican’s plan to seize remittances, the money Mexican immigrants send their loved ones across the border, unless our southern neighbor agreed to pay for a border wall.

Then there’s rightist pundit Ann Coulter, author of the error-riddled anti-immigration screed *Adios America* and *In Trump We Trust*, a biography. Fond of bemoaning the addition of new Americans she insults as “illiterate peasants” and complaining that their arrival is making our country both “brownier” and “shorter,” Coulter called the immigration address Trump gave in

Phoenix hours after his meeting with Peña Nieto “the most magnificent speech in human history.”

Further bolstering the case that Trump may try to fundamentally alter the nation’s legal immigration system: Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst with the Libertarian Cato Institute. He estimates that implementing the next president’s official proposals would cut the number of foreigners getting green cards each year by 62.9 percent, shutting out 640,000 legal immigrants.

“If a liberal Democrat proposed policies that would restrict legal gun ownership by up to 62.9 percent, conservatives and Republicans would rightly label that Democrat as anti-gun,” Nowrasteh stated. “It is fair and reasonable to label somebody who proposes policies that could restrict immigration by up to 62.9 percent as anti-immigration or anti-legal immigration.”

From the start, Trump often blurred the details on his legal immigration stance, opting for a dog whistle instead of his usual megaphone. Consider:

- He said Gonzalo Curiel, the Indiana-born judge presiding over the fraud case involving Trump’s expensive real estate seminars, should be disqualified because Curiel’s parents were immigrants.
- He refused to repudiate efforts — fomented in part by one of his top campaign advisers’ former employers — to smear the founder of Chobani, because the yogurt maker hires refugees.
- In a speech over the campaign’s final weekend, Trump labeled Somali refugees living in Minneapolis as potential terrorists.

Trump’s own uncharacteristically wonky vow to keep “immigration levels measured by population share within historical norms,” also found in his official policy statements, caught Tom Gjelten’s attention. The NPR reporter is the author of *A Nation of Nations*, a book about how the 1965 immigration law accidentally spurred a demographic revolution by racist tendencies dating back to the earliest days of the nation.

Benjamin Franklin said “America would benefit ‘by excluding all Blacks and Tawneys,’” Gjelten observes, and “the first immigration law, passed by Congress in 1790, offered US citizenship only to ‘free white persons.’” Starting in 1921, US immigration laws intentionally made it easier to for newcomers from places like Sweden, Germany and England to relocate here, and harder for people from Southern and Eastern European nations like Italy or Yugoslavia. National-origin quotas inspired by the ethnic composition of our country in 1890 underpinned that system. This approach sharply reduced the number of immigrants who settled here.

Does Trump want to choke off most legal immigration, especially by non-white people? “The problem with Donald Trump is that so much of what he says is coded that you can take from it what you want,” Gjelten said.

The interpretation Trump supporters offer is telling. “This kind of emphasis on dealing with legal immigration in this way is not something a major nominee has done in the last 60 years,” Roy Beck, the head of the Numbers USA anti-immigration group, said to the *Los Angeles Times*.

Coulter, who inveighs against the 1965 immigration law for causing the “nonstop importation of Muslims” and “the browning of America,” expressed an eagerness to aid Trump’s transition to the Oval Office after the Phoenix speech.

The truth is that no matter what Trump does, he lacks the power to make the country, including the electorate, less diverse. “If you were to cut off all immigration tomorrow, the demographics wouldn’t be that affected,” notes Capitol Hill staffer Douglas Rivlin. “Most of the growth in the Latino vote is from US citizen children turning 18.”