

More new citizens? It's no credit to Trump

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Faulty accounts lead to faulty outcomes.

By some baffling process, the Trump administration has acquired a reputation for not welcoming foreigners to our shores. This terrible misimpression grieves Ken Cuccinelli. He has offered a kinder, gentler approach intended to reassure every American who takes a positive view of legal immigration.

In a Fox News interview, the acting director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services spoke of the “very moving experience” of the naturalization ceremonies he has attended, seeing people who come from all over the world take an oath of allegiance to this country. He said the administration actually has increased the number of people becoming citizens.

“Last year, we were in the range of 850,000, and that was the most in five years,” he said. “People who come after the president and this administration say, ‘Oh, you know, you don’t like immigrants.’ Well, we are letting more people become citizens than has happened in years.”

It’s a surprising image: Huddled masses, yearning to breathe free, flocking into the warm embrace of Donald Trump, who swells with pride at their eagerness to do the right things to become full members of our society. Regrettably, I must advise you it bears no resemblance to the truth.

In the first place, Trump does not spare contempt for legal immigrants who become citizens. He said Rep. Ilhan Omar, born in Somalia, brought here as a child and naturalized as a teen, should “go back” to her native land. Maybe you’ve heard about it.

Cuccinelli is also an ill-suited messenger. He has called for repealing birthright citizenship and called Rep. Steve King, an unabashed white nationalist, “one of my very favorite Congressmen.” Cuccinelli also said that the president’s call for four Democratic women House members to leave the country was not racist. So what he exudes is not credibility.

His account was also faulty, as PolitiFact noted. The 850,000 figure is the number of applications that were completed in 2018; the number approved was about 756,800. Cuccinelli was off by nearly 100,000. Between 2016 and 2018, the number of petitions approved barely budged.

The number of people filing citizenship applications did rise in 2017, but not because Trump made them feel they belong. Just the opposite. Rep. Mary Gay Scanlon, D-Pa., who was a legal services attorney at the time of the 2016 election, has said: “We started encouraging people to obtain citizenship if they were eligible, due to the anti-immigrant rhetoric coming from the administration. And I think the administration helped deliver that message pretty forcefully.”

If you're worried about being punished because you're a foreigner, the logical move is to become a U.S. citizen, with all the protections that go with that status. It was fear of Trump's policies that drove the jump in applications.

But applying is not the same as getting. Cuccinelli neglected to mention all the ways his agency has impeded people from becoming U.S. citizens.

An immigrant needs to have a green card — that is, be a legal permanent resident — for at least five years to be allowed to naturalize. Cato Institute analyst Alex Nowrasteh told me the administration “has been trying to cut down on the number of green cards issued each year” — which would cut the number of possible naturalizations in the future. Under Trump, the denial rate on these applications has risen by more than a quarter.

His colleague David Bier notes USCIS has increased “the load of paperwork for immigration applications by double, triple or more.” The American Immigration Lawyers Association found that the typical time it takes to process an application for citizenship rose by 46% in the past two years.

The National Partnership for New Americans says that despite a drop in applications in 2018, the backlog of petitions rose to 738,148. That's bigger than the population of Washington, D.C.

In many cities, the wait time can exceed 20 months — which means “certain people who apply for citizenship today may be prevented from being naturalized and subsequently being able to register to vote in time to participate in the 2020 elections,” says NPNA.

That effect could be completely unintentional on the part of the administration, just as Cuccinelli could win the Heisman Trophy. Neither is easy to imagine.

The president has made his feelings about foreigners clear, and his administration has translated those prejudices into policy. When more foreigners become Americans, it's not because of Trump. It's in spite of him.