

The Journal Gazette

Bill targets legal immigration

David Nakamura

August 3, 2017

President Trump on Wednesday endorsed a new bill in the Senate aimed at slashing legal immigration levels over a decade, a goal Trump endorsed on the campaign trail that would represent a profound change to U.S. immigration policies that have been in place for half a century.

Trump appeared with Sens. Tom Cotton (Ark.) and David Perdue (Ga.) at the White House to unveil a modified version of a bill the senators first introduced in April to cut immigration by half from the current level of more than 1 million green cards per year granting foreigners permanent legal residence in the United States.

The outlines of the legislation reflect the aims Trump touted on the campaign trail, when he argued that the rapid growth of immigration over five decades had harmed job opportunities for American workers and led to risks to national security. Trump had met twice previously at the White House with Cotton and Perdue to discuss the details of their legislation, which is titled the Reforming American Immigration for Strong Employment (RAISE) Act.

“This would be the most significant reform to the immigration system in half a century,” said Trump, flanked by the senators in the Roosevelt Room. “It is a historic and very vital proposal.”

Despite criticism, a federal program that awards U.S. permanent residency to foreigners through a lottery has been around for almost 30 years. This is how the lottery works. (Claritza Jimenez/The Washington Post)

The legislation would mark a major shift in U.S. immigration laws, which over the past half century have permitted a growing number of immigrants to come to the country to work or join relatives already living here legally.

To achieve the reductions and create what they call a “merit-based system,” Cotton and Perdue are taking aim at green cards for extended family members of U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents, limiting such avenues for grown children and siblings. Minor children and spouses would still be eligible to apply for green cards.

The senators also propose to end a visa diversity lottery that has awarded 50,000 green cards a year, mostly to areas in the world that traditionally do not have as many immigrants to the United States, including Africa. And the bill caps refugee levels at 50,000 per year.

Under the bill, the new immigration system would award points to green card applicants based on such factors as English ability, education levels and job skills. The senators said the proposal is modeled after immigration programs in Canada and Australia.

At a speech in Youngstown, Ohio, on July 25, President Trump said that instead of the current "terrible system where anybody comes in," with a green card, he wants to create a merit-based system of legal immigration. (Photo: Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

Cotton said that while immigrant rights groups might view the current system as a "symbol of America's virtue and generosity," he sees it "as a symbol we're not committed to working-class Americans and we need to change that."

Trump's appearance with the senators came as the White House moved to elevate immigration back to the political forefront after the president suffered a major defeat when the Senate narrowly rejected his push to repeal the Affordable Care Act. The president made a speech last Friday on Long Island in which he pushed Congress to devote more resources to fighting illegal immigration, including transnational gangs.

The event on Wednesday illustrated the president's efforts to broaden his push to reform border control laws beyond illegal immigration. Trump called the changes to legal immigration necessary to protect American workers, including racial minorities, from rising competition for lower-paid jobs.

"Among those who have been hit hardest in recent years are immigrants and minority workers competing for jobs against brand new arrivals," Trump said. "It has not been fair to our people, our citizens and our workers."

But the bill's prospects are dim in the Senate, where Republicans hold a narrow majority and would have difficulty getting 60 votes to prevent a filibuster. The legislation is expected to face fierce resistance from congressional Democrats and immigrant rights groups and opposition from business leaders and some moderate Republicans in states with large immigrant populations.

Opponents of slashing immigration levels said immigrants help boost the economy and that studies have shown they commit crimes at lower levels than do native-born Americans.

"This is just a fundamental restructuring of our immigration system which has huge implications for the future," said Kevin Appleby, the senior director of international migration policy for the Center for Migration Studies. "This is part of a broader strategy by this administration to rid the country of low-skilled immigrants they don't favor in favor of immigrants in their image."

Other critics said the Raise Act, which maintains the annual cap for employment-based green cards at the current level of 140,000, would not increase skilled immigration and could make it more difficult for employers to hire the workers they need. And they noted that Canada and Australia admit more than twice the number of immigrants to their countries as the United States does currently when judged as a percentage of their overall population levels.

"Just because you have a PhD doesn't mean you're necessarily more valuable to the U.S. economy," said Stuart Anderson, executive director of the National Foundation for American

Policy. "The best indication of whether a person is employable is if someone wants to hire them."

Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the CATO Institute, wrote in a blog that the bill "would do nothing to boost skilled immigration and it will only increase the proportion of employment-based green cards by cutting other green cards. Saying otherwise is grossly deceptive marketing."

Groups that favor stricter immigration policies hailed the legislation as a step in the right direction. Roy Beck, president of NumbersUSA, said the Raise Act "will do more than any other action to fulfill President Trump's promises as a candidate to create an immigration system that puts the interests of American workers first."