Trump-backed RAISE Act decoded: Points-based immigration, green cards slashed

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Having decided to move on from healthcare, the Trump administration has backed proposed legislation that would markedly overhaul America's immigration process.

The H-1B visa system – which tech bosses rely on to fly in foreigners to swell office ranks – isn't explicitly mentioned in the Reforming American Immigration for a Strong Economy Act, or the RAISE Act, which was put forward today.

However, it appears the H-1B system, under the draft rules, could be superseded by a points-based mechanism whereby the highest-paying jobs get priority. That would be more or less in line with the President's previous promises on immigration reform.

The draft law is in its early stages of development, and was drawn up by Senators Tom Cotton (R-AR) and David Perdue (R-GA) after they had meetings with Trump. The legislation will require support from the House of Reps and Democrats in the Senate to proceed.

"This legislation will not only restore our competitive edge in the 21st century, but it will restore the sacred bonds of trust between America and its citizens," said President Donald Trump.

"This legislation demonstrates our compassion for struggling American families who deserve an immigration system that puts their needs first and that puts America first."

The proposed rules would dramatically alter the way permanent residency permits are awarded in the Land of the Free^{TM}. The number of cards issued would be slashed by up to 50 per cent over the next decade, and employment-based visas would be given out using a points-based system that rewards English-speaking people who have top-notch qualifications and/or solid finances.

"The higher entry standards established in this proposal will allow authorities to do a more thorough job reviewing applicants for entry, therefore protecting the security of the US homeland," said Attorney General Jeff Sessions.

"The American people deserve a lawful immigration system that promotes our national interest. The RAISE Act would give us a more merit-based immigration system that admits the best and the brightest around the world, while making it harder for people to come here illegally."

No favors

Under the act, green card holders and US citizens will still get preferential treatment for securing residency permits for their spouses and young children, but the reforms will mean that adult children and the extended family won't get any special favors. Nor will parents, although those seeking medical treatment will be able to apply for temporary visas.

The new criteria for employment-based visas will prioritize those with a master's degree, then a graduate degree. Extra weight will be given to those with strong English language skills, and those aged 26 to 31 will get more points than those older or younger – the further away you are from that bracket, the fewer points you'll get. Immigrants will not be able to collect any means-tested federal public benefits for five years after arrival.

STEM graduates with a PhD that was earned in the US are the most preferred type of immigrant, it seems, earning 13 points for their level of education. By contrast a foreign university's master's degree in STEM, even if it's from Oxford or Cambridge in the UK, is worth just eight points and a bachelor's degree at an overseas uni in a subject unrelated to STEM gets you just six points.

Having a job to come to also makes a massive difference. If you have a position with a salary more than 300 per cent of the median household income of the US state you're moving to, then you get 13 points, compared to just five if you earn 150 per cent. According to the latest official figures, released in 2016, the US median household income is $55,775 (£42,200), and 300 per cent of that is $167,325 (£126,600).

You can also buy your way in, under the proposed law. Invest $1.8m for three years in a business you work in and you get 12 points straight off the bat, although this falls to six points if you only chuck in $1.35m.

Winners of a Nobel Prize get an automatic 25 points, and an additional 15 points can be earned for immigrants who have won either an "individual Olympic medal or placed first in an international sporting event in which the majority of the best athletes in an Olympic sport were represented."

Applications will be sorted in order of points earned, and the top scorers will get their paperwork rubber-stamped. Up to 140,000 a year will be allowed in. This is based on Canada and Australia's points systems for immigrants, we're told. Alex Nowrasteh at the Koch-backed Cato Institute has published a full analysis of the package proposed this week for America, and concluded Cotton and Perdue's bill "won't work."