THE HUFFINGTON POST

The Real Goal Of Trump's 'Merit-Based' Immigration Plan May Just Be Fewer Immigrants

That's ironic because the countries he thinks get it right actually welcome more people.

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March 9, 2017

President Donald Trump claimed in his speech to Congress last week that he could "save countless dollars, raise workers' wages and help struggling families" with one trick: switching to a "merit-based" immigration system, like Canada's or Australia's.

He made a similar case several days later in a tweet. First, he promoted *Green Card Warrior,* a book that had recently been featured on "Fox & Friends," and then he wrote, "The merit-based system is the way to go. Canada, Australia!"

Immigration and labor experts, however, are skeptical of such a system — not because they oppose any consideration of would-be immigrants' qualifications, but because they suspect what Trump and his allies really want is fewer immigrants overall.

"I'm concerned that what the Trump administration intends with a merit-based program is not to add to the high-skilled; it's to cut away everything around the high-skilled," said Tamar Jacoby, a Republican who supports immigration reform and president of ImmigrationWorks USA. "It's not my first concern that they're going to bring too many computer programmers. It's that they're not going to bring enough of other different kinds of workers that we need."

The president argues that immigration hurts Americans. But most economists disagree, concluding that both authorized and unauthorized immigrants have a small positive effect on

economic growth. That's largely because they spend their earnings on goods and services, plowing the money back into the economy.

Trump's joint address singled out low-skilled workers and those who cannot support themselves financially as the problem. "Switching away from this current system of lower-skilled immigration, and instead adopting a merit-based system, will have many benefits," he said. "It will save countless dollars, raise workers' wages and help struggling families ― including immigrant families ― enter the middle class."

Sens. Tom Cotton (left) and David Perdue unveil their plan to slash legal immigration on Feb. 7, 2017.

The president hasn't put out a specific proposal for what a merit-based immigration system would look like, and the White House did not respond to a request for more information on any such plan. But measures put forward by some of his allies provide a clue. In February, Sens. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) and David Perdue (R-Ga.) introduced a bill aimed at cutting legal immigration by half, from about 1 million people admitted each year to about 500,000. After leaving a White House meeting on Tuesday afternoon, Cotton and Perdue said Trump seemed to like their proposal.

Some conservatives and immigration restrictionists have also focused on reducing family-based immigration to the U.S. Most immigrants who gain lawful permanent status, or green cards, do so through family ties ― often because a family member who is a U.S. citizen or legal permanent resident sponsors them. In 2014, roughly 64 percent of the 1 million immigrants awarded green cards obtained them through a family recommendation. Only 15 percent obtained a green card through employer sponsorship.

The administration and its allies may be targeting immigration based on family ties as well, said Stuart Anderson, executive director of the nonpartisan National Foundation for American Policy.

Judging from their rhetoric, he said, it "seems pretty unlikely that this is a sincere effort to increase the number of highly skilled people entering the country and really more a method to eliminate family immigration to the United States, and potentially some other categories."

"There's no way you're going to get a proposal from this administration that has the same level of immigration we have today, approximately 1 million people, but all of them will have graduate degrees," Anderson said. "That's not going to be what the proposal is."

If Trump truly wanted to mimic Canada or Australia, it would mean considerably more immigration, not less. If the U.S. accepted immigrants at the same rate as Canada does, relative to population size, the current yearly total of about 1 million would rise to about 2.5 million, as Anderson pointed out in a recent Forbes commentary. At Australia's rate, the total would increase to 2.9 million people.

That's part of why pro-immigration experts suggest that being more like Canada wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing. In fact, it would be "a big improvement," said Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute.

Canada has a point system for immigration that gives preference based on factors such as education, age, employment experience and language. But the country also has a large guest-worker visa program, admits many refugees through private sponsorship, allows for family reunification and sets no cap on the number of immigrants admitted.

"What's most likely is folks who talk about the benefits of the Canadian system but are immigration restrictionists don't know very much about the Canadian system," Nowrasteh said. "Or they just like the idea of more skills so much that they're willing to take that trade-off: more skilled workers but a greater number."

Canada and Australia have both tweaked their "merit-based" systems over time, since sometimes people who have desirable qualifications on paper aren't actually what's needed in the labor market or aren't able to adjust well to the country, Jacoby said.

"Every country in the world, when they start with the thing of 'We're going to overhaul our immigration system,' the first sentence they learn somewhere is 'Make it more like Canada's,'" she said. "The first word they learn — it's like 'Mama' and 'Papa' — it's 'Canada.' And they think of Canada and Australia as having point systems ... but the truth is not even Canada and Australia actually have systems like that anymore."

The book that Trump touted in his tweet about the virtues of a merit-based system, supposedly like those of Canada and Australia, isn't actually about any of those topics. *Green Card Warrior* mostly chronicles the author's own experience in legally immigrating to the U.S. It also inadvertently makes the case that the U.S. is already rejecting people for having too little money, which Trump has said the government should do more often.

The author, conservative Australian pundit Nick Adams, writes that U.S. officials told him his green card application was halted because he didn't have enough in his bank account. His book argues that he was targeted for being a conservative — it calls for the impeachment of the consular official who rejected his application — and says he quickly rectified the financial concern by having his father deposit $200,000 in his account.

Adams' comments in his book and on "Fox & Friends" — which appear to have inspired Trump's tweet (he flagged @foxandfriends on the message) — focus more on condemning unauthorized immigrants and refugees than making a case for a merit-based immigration system.

"If America is going to remain the exceptional country, we need to make sure people that are coming here are going to be American," said Adams on the morning show. "They have got to subscribe to our values. Individualism, not collectivism. *E pluribus unum*, not multiculturalism. Equality of opportunity, not equality of outcome."

Mexican workers, who came as seasonal laborers under the H-2B program, process crabs on Hoopers Island, Maryland, in August 2015.

One thing notably absent from Trump's touting of merit-based immigration is any mention of the vast number of temporary foreign laborers in the U.S. workforce. Past reform proposals from both Republicans and Democrats have typically included changes to the government's various guest-worker programs. More than a million people are currently working in the U.S. on a temporary basis through programs such as the H-1B visa for highly skilled foreign workers.

Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) criticized Trump's joint address last week for saying the president would protect U.S. workers with new immigration policies while ignoring tech and other industries that make heavy use of H-1B visas.

"On Tuesday night, I listened in vain to your address to a Joint Session of Congress for any mention of H-1B visa reform to protect American workers," Durbin said in a letter to the president. "Instead, I heard more scaremongering about immigrants and immigration."

The U.S. grants hundreds of thousands of visas every year to people who aren't looking to immigrate, though some visa recipients do wind up staying and eventually gain permanent legal status. Guest-worker visas have long been controversial. Critics say guest-worker visas essentially allow companies to import cheaper foreign labor, leading to unfair labor conditions for the foreign workers, who risk deportation if they complain, and lowering wages for the Americans who compete with them for jobs.

For years, Durbin and Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) have co-sponsored legislation that would order companies seeking H-1B visas to make a good-faith effort to hire American workers first. Their legislation, which was co-sponsored last year by then-Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.), now Trump's attorney general, would also prioritize H-1B applicants with higher levels of education. Currently, the limited number of these visas are given out each year via lottery.

Trump has said he would crack down on visa abuse, even promising to direct the Labor Department to begin investigating the H-1B program on his first day in office. He didn't, but the Trump administration recently suspended the expedited processing of H-1B applications for employers that pay extra for the option ― a step that some firms that use the program have taken as an ominous sign.

In addition to the H-1B visas for skilled professionals, the government offers a wide variety of other visas, including H-2A and H-2B visas to bring in low-skilled workers for jobs that Americans supposedly won't do, such as picking produce and landscaping. An Economic Policy Institute analysis in 2015 found that the wages of low-skilled guest workers were 11 percent lower than the wages of legal immigrant workers ― and about the same as undocumented immigrants earn ― largely because their employers control their visas. The labor-backed think tank has also reported that wages are flat or falling in the top 15 occupations for H-2B visa holders.

Guest-worker programs represent a bigger threat to American workers than immigration does, according to the institute's Daniel Costa.

"The place where you should start is fixing the guest-worker programs," Costa said. "That's where there's actual evidence it's keeping wages low."