



Donald Trump Is Using The Pandemic To Push His Anti-Immigration Agenda

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President Donald Trump has been pushing measures to restrict immigration to the United States for years. Now he's using the coronavirus pandemic to justify a crackdown on immigration that puts vulnerable migrants — including children — at risk and separates families, and could deepen the current economic crisis.

Since declaring a national emergency over COVID-19 in March, Trump has halted refugee resettlement, deported unaccompanied children fleeing violence and abuse, suspended some categories of legal immigration, closed the border to asylum-seekers and repeatedly pushed back court hearings for people awaiting them in Mexico. On Monday, he restricted legal immigration even further via executive order.

Trump has claimed these policies are necessary to prevent the spread of COVID-19 from other countries and to protect American workers from competition for jobs during the pandemic-related financial crisis. But several of the immigration policies rammed through in recent months have been on the president's to-do list since his first year in office. The pandemic didn't create a need for nativist immigration policies; it simply provided an excuse for them.

That includes the Mexican border wall, an extremely costly campaign promise that Trump continues to push even during an economic downturn. On Tuesday, Trump traveled to Arizona, where COVID-19 cases are spiking, to visit border wall construction and falsely boast that his pet project had protected Americans from COVID-19. "I built the wall and it worked 100%," Trump said. The border wall, the president falsely claimed, "stopped COVID, it stopped everything, it stopped the whole deal."

This isn't true, but it does fit a pattern for the president, whose focus during the pandemic frequently turns to blaming other countries for it.

During his first address to the nation on COVID-19 in March, Trump made it clear that his primary response to the coronavirus would be to blame other countries and close off U.S. borders. He repeatedly characterized the coronavirus as a "foreign virus" and argued that banning people from other countries was key to containing the outbreak in the U.S.

Since then, the Trump administration has issued at least 48 policy changes related to the U.S. immigration system, according to a count by the National Immigration Forum, including several that have an indefinite timeline. At the same time, the U.S. has failed to reduce its number of daily new COVID-19 cases, as other countries hard-hit by the virus have managed to do.

Some of the most sweeping changes came via executive order on Monday. The new order bans multiple kinds of new work visas and will go into effect this week, lasting through the end of the year. The policy stops the issuance of the H-1B visa for skilled workers — a longtime target for immigration hard-liners — the H-2B visa for seasonal workers in industries like hospitality and food processing, the J-1 visa allowing foreigners to participate in summer internships or jobs and the L visa permitting companies to temporarily transfer employees into the U.S.

President Donald Trump signs an executive order to revamp the H-1B visa guest worker program and spur U.S. job growth during an April 2017 visit to the Snap-On tool headquarters in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Trump's goal to cut immigration was firmly set before the coronavirus disrupted the economy.

By also extending Trump's earlier ban on many new green cards, the latest order is expected to affect 525,000 people, officials told reporters.

“This is not a COVID-19 response or an economic response. It's the exploitation of a pandemic to institute divisive policies and reshape immigration law, while superseding Congress,” the American Civil Liberties Union said in a statement on Monday.

Public health experts have urged the government to release people held in crowded federal detention facilities, suspend civil immigration enforcement and provide testing and treatment to all, regardless of immigration status, the ACLU said. “Instead, while ignoring these recommendations, the Trump administration has banned asylum seekers at the border, green card applicants, foreign students, and now even more immigrants, who are instrumental to our nation's economic recovery.”

In addition to those visa restrictions, the Trump administration made it harder for asylum-seekers already in the country to get work permits, a move that could coerce “poor asylum seekers into giving up their claims or pushing them into starvation and abusive work in the underground economy,” Yael Schacher, a senior advocate with Refugees International, tweeted on Monday.

Trump and his aides say the policies are essential to help American workers. But the Trump administration has been promoting the idea that foreigners were stealing American jobs long before the spread of the virus — and experts have refuted it for years, saying immigrant workers make the country wealthier and often fill roles that U.S. citizens are unwilling or unable to take. In requesting an H-1B visa, for instance, companies have to advertise open positions and demonstrate to the government that they need to hire a foreign worker because no American citizen is suitable.

Anti-migrant policies may make for good politics by stoking racism and providing a scapegoat for economic pain, but many experts agree they're not beneficial to the economy.

“This is not how labor markets work,” analyst Alex Nowrasteh of the libertarian Cato Institute wrote on Twitter in reference to the Trump administration's claims that the order would provide 500,000 jobs to Americans.

Past government attempts to help U.S. workers by making it harder for immigrants to get jobs slowed down the national growth in wages, Nowrasteh noted in a Monday blog post, arguing that such policies reduce innovation and demand in the economy.

The new order also undermines the president's repeated claims that he wants the most qualified foreigners, particularly international students, to contribute to the U.S. Even some of his allies highlighted the inconsistency: "Legal immigration is a positive for the American economy," Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) wrote on Twitter. "Like all Americans, I want to recreate the strong economy we had before coronavirus.... President Trump built it once and he can build it again, but not if the tools that helped create the strongest economy in generations are not available."

Business leaders condemned Trump's change — while competitors to the U.S. saw an opportunity.

"Imagine if Real Madrid Or Barcelona could only hire players from Spain. They probably wouldn't be the best in the world anymore. This is what the new executive orders will do to American technology companies," DuoLingo CEO Luis von Ahn, who immigrated to the U.S. from Guatemala, wrote on Twitter.

Bessma Momani, a professor at the University of Waterloo in Canada, suggested the "short-sighted Trump measure" could produce "a brain gain" for her country.

For thousands of people considering working in the U.S. or already dealing with the American immigration system after, say, studying in the country, Trump's move stirred panic and made their futures uncertain.

"I struggled to get and hold my H-1B visa. It is a process of constant anxiety, uncertainty, but it also gave me a future. Never forget that at the other end of this executive order is a graduate with shattered dreams, a relationship facing separation, a life getting disrupted," writer Nur Ibrahim, a reporter for the fact-checking website Snopes, wrote on Twitter. "No one thinks about those experiences."