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Trump faces battle over move to cut legal immigration to US

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A battle over the future of legal immigration in the US is set to come to a head in the coming days as President Donald Trump tries to end what he calls “chain migration”.

After a bipartisan budget deal ended a brief government shutdown last week, the House and Senate will turn to the future of the Dreamers, the young undocumented immigrants who came to the US as small children, as well as broader immigration reforms that could overhaul the way Washington lets legal immigrants into the country.

Immigration was one of the issues at the core of disagreements between Democrats and Republicans that led to the shutdown, and the budget deal did not offer a way to break the impasse on the fate of Dreamers.

Mr Trump has endorsed a bill in the Senate that aims to cut the number of legal immigrants to the US by half by limiting which family members an American citizen or green card holder can sponsor. Such a move would overturn five decades of political consensus in which immigrants with families in the US are given priority.

“Under the current broken system, a single immigrant can bring in virtually unlimited number of distant relatives,” Mr Trump declared to Republican cheers and Democratic hisses in his State of the Union speech last month. “Under our plan, we focus on the immediate family by limiting sponsorships to spouses and minor children.”

Democrats oppose the proposed Republican bill, which could be brought to the chamber as soon as this month. They have advocated on behalf of two bipartisan bills, currently under discussion in the House and Senate, which would provide amnesty to the Dreamers and strengthen border security, but not provide funding for Mr Trump’s border wall or touch legal immigration.

Paul Ryan, House Speaker, has suggested he will not bring such a bill to the floor, because he does not believe the president would sign it.

Immigration advocates have accused the president of extending his attacks on illegal migrants to legal ones as well by distorting how the family-based immigration system works.

“We are talking about redefining the way the country admits new immigrants and changing the system that has been in place since 1965,” said Guillermo Cantor, research director at the American Immigration Council, which advocates on behalf of immigrants.

“This has been a foundational component for many years. There is a host of literature for how important families are for the integration of immigrants.”

Before Mr Trump, few Republicans talked seriously about cutting legal immigration, said Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute. “The notion that this has now become front and centre shows just how far the party has shifted just in the past couple of years.”

Polls show a nation divided on the topic. Democrats tout a June 2017 poll by Gallup that found 62 per cent of Americans, including 49 per cent of Republicans, want to see immigration levels in the US either increase or stay at their current levels. This is a drastic shift from the mid-1990s when roughly two-thirds of Americans wanted lower levels of immigration.

However, the White House cites a January 2018 Harvard Harris poll in which four-fifths of respondents said priority should go to “a person’s ability to contribute to America as measured by their education and skills”, rather than whether that person had relatives in the US.

Mark Krikorian, who has advised Mr Trump on immigration and is executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, which calls for stricter curbs on immigration, said the Harvard Harris poll showed that while centrist Republicans advocated more moderate reforms during Congress’s last bipartisan bill on immigration in 2013, Republican voters felt differently.

“This is why you have Trump. Because of the disconnect between the elite’s views and the public’s views . . . The Republican Party, especially on immigration, but also on trade, was out of step with their own voters.”

Democrats are fighting back. Cecilia Muñoz, who helped craft the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (Daca) policy of which the Dreamers are beneficiaries, said Mr Trump was trying to build support for reinventing the entire US immigration system. “You don’t have to choose between a family-based system and a merit-based immigration. You can do both.”

While other countries such as Australia and Canada have adopted a merit-based immigration system, the US distributes more green cards for family reasons than employment on the belief that bringing in more families, as opposed to more immigrant workers, was better for the social fabric. Roughly two-thirds of the green cards distributed between 2007 and 2016 were given to immigrants whose US family members had petitioned for them to come, according to the Department of Homeland Security.

US green card holders are allowed to sponsor their spouses and non-adult children to come to the US with them, while US citizens can request their parents, siblings and adult children be given US residence.

In practice, however, those parents and siblings and adult children will probably wait years before their application is even examined, meaning it may be decades before those family members could in turn sponsor their own family members in the sort of “chain” Mr Trump depicts.

“Those visa categories are so backed up right now depending on which country they’re from, it can take 10 to 20 years for that person to make it to the United States,” said Romy Kapoor, an immigration attorney in Atlanta.

In January, the state department was only reviewing applications for siblings, parents and adult children that were submitted on or before June 22 2004. For those applying from the Philippines and Mexico — the two countries that produce the most applicants — the waiting time is more than two decades.