

# THE NEW REPUBLIC

## Trump's New Strategy to Demonize Immigrants

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Donald Trump's antipathy to immigrants has been a defining feature of his rise to power and his presidency. He has focused much of that ire, personally and in his policies, on undocumented immigrants. But there are signs he wants to target documented immigrants, too. In February, Reuters reported that the Department of Homeland Security was "considering making it harder for foreigners living in the United States to get permanent residency if they or their American-born children use public benefits such as food assistance."

A draft rule, which has not been released to the public, reportedly stated, "Non-citizens who receive public benefits are not self-sufficient and are relying on the U.S. government and state and local entities for resources instead of their families, sponsors or private organizations. An alien's receipt of public benefits comes at taxpayer expense and availability of public benefits may provide an incentive for aliens to immigrate to the United States."

These restrictions may now be close to fruition. On Tuesday, NBC News reported that Trump's immigration policy adviser, Stephen Miller, is preparing a rule that would penalize documented immigrants for using certain public benefits: Use of food stamps, the Children's Health Insurance Program, or even Obamacare could cost a documented immigrant a green card or prevent them from gaining citizenship.

"Any proposed changes would ensure that the government takes the responsibility of being good stewards of taxpayer funds seriously and adjudicates immigration benefit requests in accordance with the law," said a DHS spokesperson who confirmed that changes are in the works. Trump officials have sent the proposal to the White House Office of Budget and Management, the last step before the rule is released to the public for comment.

The rule is premised on the notion that non-citizens burden citizen taxpayers by taking welfare benefits or other public funds. But the evidence doesn't support this. Not only is it extremely difficult to immigrate legally to the United States, it's even more difficult to access benefits after doing so. A fair examination of the evidence points to one inescapable conclusion: Trump's policy isn't intended to shore up the welfare state for citizens, but to undermine it by reducing immigration.

The administration's explanation for these proposals are the latest chapter in the longstanding, racialized disdain in America for welfare recipients (of which *The New Republic* itself has been

guilty). The specter of the welfare queen still looms large in conservative imaginings, and now Trump has added immigrants to this bogeyman. “At its core, Trump’s [immigration] rhetoric is the same as Ronald Reagan’s 1976 campaign against ‘welfare queens’ that’s reared its head in just about every election since,” CityLab reported in 2015, after Trump’s campaign hit full swing.

In recent years conservatives have pushed the notion that immigration threatens America’s public resources. “Most of these illegals are drawing welfare benefits, they’re sending their kids to school, they’re using the public services,” Tom Delay said in 2016, though he conceded most still pay taxes. The Center for Immigration Studies, an anti-immigration think tank founded by a eugenicist, claimed on its website that households headed by immigrants, both documented and undocumented, “make more extensive use of welfare.” Trump’s reliance on CIS’s analysis is well-established. As Laura Reston previously reported for *The New Republic*, Trump has repeatedly cited CIS’s data and analyses in speeches, and in return, CIS has consistently defended the administration’s immigration restriction.

Immigrants, legal and otherwise, actually pay billions of dollars in taxes per year, though they often aren’t legally eligible for a full range of welfare benefits. States have some discretion, and can expand access to welfare if they choose, but generally, permanent residents can receive means-tested welfare benefits like Medicaid only after five years of residence in the United States. Documented migrants who have temporary status aren’t eligible for any benefits at all.

It’s particularly strange that the Trump administration reportedly sees Obamacare use as evidence of an immigrant’s welfare dependency; Obamacare allowed states to expand Medicaid, but in states that have chosen not to take advantage of that benefit, it only subsidizes private health insurance. Beneficiaries often pay hundreds of dollars out of pocket for premiums every month. It’s hardly a universal entitlement for anyone, let alone immigrants.

There’s no evidence that immigrants take up disproportionate space in America’s pool of welfare beneficiaries, either. Existing welfare restrictions tend to work as intended. As Vox noted in 2017, CIS skewed the data. Its analysis compared immigrant-headed households directly to citizen-headed households, without considering discrepancies in household size. Immigrants tend to have larger families, and their households therefore often include citizen children. When an immigrant-headed household participates in the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, formerly called food stamps, those benefits go to everyone in the household, citizen and non-citizen alike.

When researchers at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, examined CIS’s data set, they produced different results. “Overall, immigrants are less likely to consume welfare benefits and, when they do, they generally consume a lower dollar value of benefits than native-born Americans,” Cato concluded. “Immigrants who meet the eligibility thresholds of age for the entitlement programs or poverty for the means-tested welfare programs generally have lower use rates and consume a lower dollar value relative to native-born Americans.” Another report by a different libertarian think tank, the Niskanen Center, supported Cato’s conclusion: Low-income

immigrants are less likely to use means-tested benefits like SNAP, Supplemental Security Income, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

Immigration may even be a way for Trump to kickstart the economic growth he's promised to deliver. A 2016 analysis by the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania found that there are long-term economic benefits to immigration, with few downsides. Immigration doesn't depress the wages of native-born workers, and while it does increase the pool of available labor, that trend is matched by another: Immigrants spend money, which in turn grows the economy. And if American birth rates continue to decline—last year marked a 30-year low—there's even less reason to restrict immigration. Without immigrants to ensure America's population growth, aging Americans could find themselves in need of a welfare state with too few taxpayers to support it.

The probable benefits to the welfare state aren't the only or even the most important impact of immigration, as Alex Press recently noted at Vox, but it's undeniable that an aging population of Boomers, Gen Xers, and eventually Millennials may find themselves reliant on a welfare system that lacks the tax base it needs to survive. This impending threat might not trouble the Trump administration, or Republicans who view welfare as a pernicious drain on public resources. But in fulfilling his promises to restrict immigration, Trump may sacrifice America's economic health.