Trump and Stephen Miller are now targeting legal immigrants. This will get uglier.

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Republicans become deeply offended when you suggest that their party is in the process of adopting a white nationalist agenda, and that many of their voters are motivated by xenophobia. No no, they say, we acknowledge that America is a nation of immigrants; we just want a secure border and all the laws to be enforced. We welcome *legal* immigrants; it's *illegal* immigration we have a problem with.

But then you get something like this, as reported by NBC's Julia Ainsley:

The Trump administration is expected to issue a proposal in coming weeks that would make it harder for legal immigrants to become citizens or get green cards if they have ever used a range of popular public welfare programs, including Obamacare, four sources with knowledge of the plan told NBC News.

The move, which would not need Congressional approval, is part of White House senior adviser Stephen Miller's plan to limit the number of migrants who obtain legal status in the U.S. each year.

Details of the rulemaking proposal are still being finalized, but based on a recent draft seen last week and described to NBC News, immigrants living legally in the U.S. who have ever used or whose household members have ever used Obamacare, children's health insurance, food stamps and other benefits could be hindered from obtaining legal status in the U.S.

So much for the idea that Republicans only want to eliminate illegal immigration. Donald Trump — who, let's not forget, got elected by saying he'd ban Muslims from entering the country and build a wall on our southern border — is following through on his vision, and that of people like Stephen Miller, that America should no longer welcome immigrants, and kick out as many of those who are already here as they can.

As Ainsley reports, the administration has drastically reduced the number of green cards they grant and the number of green card holders who are granted citizenship. They've also tried to cut legal immigration levels, taken steps to all but shut America's doors to asylum-

seekers, unleashed ICE to pursue people for deportation who have been living lawfully in the U.S. for decades, and of course enacted the horrific family separation policy at the border, with the explicit intent of deterring people from trying to come to America lest their children be ripped from their arms.

There's little doubt that these initiatives are born of the sincere contempt that President Trump, Stephen Miller, and others in the administration have for immigrants, particularly non-white ones. The president has made that clear again and again. But there's a political calculation at work, too.

Trump knows that he has to keep feeding his base red meat on immigration, and one of the benefits of this policy is that it wouldn't require congressional approval. Another benefit is that it can easily play into the misconceptions and prejudices Americans already hold.

You may have noticed that the NBC story used the word "welfare" when referring to programs like food stamps, the Affordable Care Act, and the Children's Health Insurance Program. As it happens, extensive research has shown that term is racially charged and turns people against whatever policy you're using it to refer to. The strategy is clear: portray legal immigrants as a drain on the system, taking advantage of hard-working people like you.

Indeed, this new move should be looked at in the context of the midterm elections. We already know that Miller (and Trump) want the fall elections to be all about immigration. In the spring, Miller said in an interview that he wants the "big fight" this summer to pit Trump's immigration agenda, which he described as pro-American-worker, against the Democrats' embrace of "open borders." (Both of those are lies, but never mind that for now.) Plainly, Miller and other Republicans want immigration to be in the headlines, to make it harder for Democrats to break through with talk about the Trump/GOP tax cut for the rich and the Trump/GOP drive to repeal Obamacare, both of which have proven epic political flops. So Miller is floating this latest policy as part of this broader strategy.

But there's an additional nuance here worth appreciating. While Trump (and many GOP candidates imitating him) have used immigration to launch many race-baiting appeals designed to energize the hard-core Trumpist base — from the claim that Dems coddle MS-13 to the vow to make Mexico pay for the wall — this issue is a bit different. Immigration advocates believe the attack on immigrants claiming benefits is directed not just at the base, but also at softer supporters of Trump or even Republicans who are turning away from him, such as GOP-leaning college educated or suburban whites who might recoil at the more obvious race-based messaging.

"While 'immigrants take jobs' works with the angry, resentful base, a more potent line of attack with the better educated, more successful — and more reluctant — Republican is the 'immigrants use welfare' distortion that this policy fight sets up," Frank Sharry, the executive director of America's Voice, tells us. "These less rabid Republicans have jobs, homes, and security. They are more likely to resent the idea — inaccurate as it is — that their tax dollars are paying to support immigrants."

In fact, as a recent Cato Institute study found, "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."

That's not to mention that nearly all Americans benefit at one time or another from programs that would fit under the expansive definition of "welfare" Republicans would like to propagate. For instance, if you're not getting health insurance from the government in the form of Medicare or Medicaid, or getting subsidies through the ACA, the government is paying part of your health insurance premiums by making them tax-deductible. That's far and away the largest tax expenditure on the books, over triple the size of the mortgage interest deduction, another government program you may benefit from.

But many Americans like to believe that government programs that *I* benefit from are no less than I deserve, while government programs that *other people* benefit from represent lazy moochers sponging off the system. So saying that immigrants who ever used a program like CHIP or the ACA for them or their family members should now be refused citizenship is a pretty clear attempt to stoke anger and resentment at these people, making it easier to get rid of them.

All of which sets up an interesting test. The question will be whether the less-Trumpist GOP voters, having already been alienated by this particular administration's cruel and wretched immigration policies — particularly the family separations landing untold numbers of children in cages, but also Trump's open displays of bigotry and his stepped up deportations of longtime residents — might actually be less inclined to side with the administration on even this "softer" policy directed at supposed immigrant welfare cheats.

On this front, tonight's results out of the Ohio special House election will bear watching. Republicans are testing a strategy of deliberate polarization around immigration issues in this race, with an eye towards using it in contests across the country this fall. They are trying to tar Democrats as the party of crime and open borders by elevating the left's call to "Abolish ICE," to juice the GOP base. But this is a divided district: while much of it went heavily for Trump, it also has a lot of college educated whites, which is one reason Democrat Danny O'Connor is competitive — and those voters could be alienated by Trump's immigration appeals.

If Republicans do better than expected tonight, particularly among those voters, you can expect Republicans to see plenty of upside, and very little downside, in really cranking up these appeals going forward. This will get uglier.