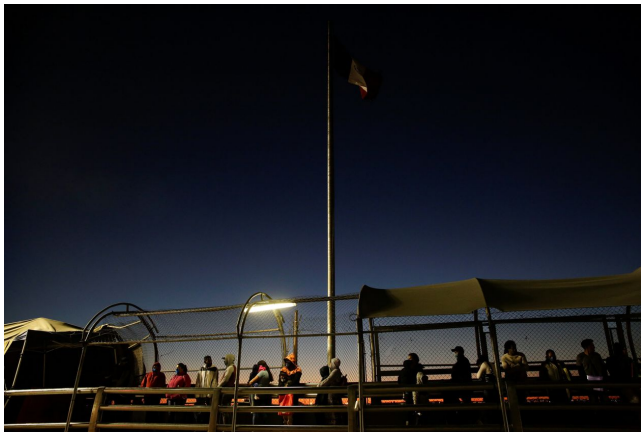


POLITICS

Trump Administration Pushes to Extend Coronavirus Immigration Limits

White House advisers are assuming public will be willing to accept new restrictions



Migrants lined up in April at a bridge connecting Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, and El Paso, Texas, to reschedule their immigration hearings.

PHOTO: JOSE LUIS GONZALEZ/REUTERS

By [Michelle Hackman](#) and [Andrew Restuccia](#)

May 8, 2020 7:00 am ET

WASHINGTON—The Trump administration, having temporarily closed borders and curtailed immigration in response to the [coronavirus pandemic](#), is moving to expand those restrictions while the president’s advisers push to leave them in place for months or even years to come, according to several people familiar with the matter.

Senior administration officials are operating on the assumption that the public, during the pandemic, will be willing to accept new limits on immigration, the people said. That, in turn, presents the administration with an opportunity to pursue long-held goals to overhaul the immigration system in the name of public health and job protection for Americans.

The president’s immigration advisers are drawing up plans for a coming executive order, expected this month, that would ban the issuance of some new temporary, work-based visas. The order is expected to focus on visa categories including H-1B, designed for highly skilled workers, and H-2B, for seasonal migrant workers, as well as student visas and the work authorization that accompanies them.

Though the scope of the order hasn’t yet been decided, administration officials said it could range from suspensions of entire visa categories to the creation of incentives to hire Americans in industries hardest-hit by layoffs.

The discussions follow a series of moves by President Trump to curtail the flow of migrants at the nation’s borders and entry points. In January, facing reports of a

spreading epidemic, the White House announced travel restrictions on China. In March, the government shut down the Mexican and Canadian borders to nonessential travel and enacted a policy of expelling any migrant crossing the border illegally or asking for asylum.

In April, the president signed an executive order temporarily barring new immigrants for 60 days, including family members of U.S. citizens. The coming changes, the administration has suggested, will build on this April action.

The moves, so far, are billed as temporary. But some administration officials argue the restraints on immigration may need to be in place at least until a vaccine is widely deployed in the U.S. and Latin America, which could take more than a year.

“If we are taking actions on immigration that help improve public health, help improve the economy, help improve jobs, it’s a vindication or validation that the president was right since day one,” a senior Department of Homeland Security official said.

Even without further changes, the measures so far would amount to a significant rewrite of immigration laws without the involvement of Congress. The president’s April order focuses on immigration based on family ties—which he calls “chain migration”—as well as a program known as the diversity visa lottery, which awards 50,000 green cards a year to applicants from countries underrepresented in the U.S. population, primarily from Africa and Asia.



Stephen Miller, the architect of the president’s immigration agenda, has explored declaring a public-health emergency at the border.

PHOTO: JONATHAN ERNST/REUTERS

The nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute estimates that Mr. Trump’s April order will prevent about 26,000 immigrants from moving to the U.S. a month if it remains in place—amounting to a 30% overall cut to immigration.

As Mr. Trump seeks to reopen the economy and lift restrictions on the flow of people within the country, the administration’s immigration policy underscores a view held among White House advisers that the U.S. border, by contrast, has been far too porous for far too long.

The president’s allies have been buoyed by recent polling. While a majority of Americans support immigration, one recent Washington Post-University of Maryland poll shows that—at least as a temporary measure during the coronavirus outbreak—65% of the public backs blocking nearly all immigration into the U.S.

Stephen Miller, the architect of the president's immigration agenda, recently told representatives from conservative groups on an April conference call that the president's action to curtail family immigration could pave the way for more-permanent limits on immigrants entering the U.S., according to people familiar with the call.

Sen. Tom Cotton (R., Ark.), an immigration hard-liner who speaks regularly with the president and his senior aides, said in an interview he is pushing Mr. Trump to leave his order banning some immigrants in place for 12 to 36 months.



Republican Sen. Tom Cotton of Arkansas, in a letter, urged President Trump to suspend new guest-worker visas for 60 days.

PHOTO: ALEX BRANDON/ASSOCIATED PRESS

"I think circumstances may call for permanency or effective permanency in the months and years ahead," Mr. Cotton said.

On Thursday, Mr. Cotton and several other senators wrote a letter to the president calling on him to suspend all new guest-worker visas for 60 days and to suspend certain categories of guest-worker visas for at least a year, "or until unemployment has returned to normal levels."

Each of Mr. Trump's recent policy steps reflect goals he and his advisers have long wanted to achieve, a point Mr. Trump emphasized in announcing his new rules at the border. "Every week, our border agents encounter thousands of unscreened, unvetted and unauthorized entries from dozens of countries," Mr. Trump said at a March 20 news conference. "And we've had this problem for decades."



The San Ysidro port of entry in San Diego. White House briefings paint a picture of a ‘perfect epidemiological nightmare’ at the border.

PHOTO: ETIENNE LAURENT/SHUTTERSTOCK

He continued: “With the national emergencies and all of the other things that we’ve declared, we can actually do something about it.”

Administration officials said the recent policies are driven by the recommendations of public-health advisers, not by the president’s immigration agenda. Yet since the earliest days of the administration, Mr. Miller and his colleagues have explored the idea of declaring a public-health emergency at the border, an action he believed would allow the government to prevent migrants from applying for asylum, according to three administration officials familiar with the events.

The plan gained traction in the spring of 2019, during a particularly virulent flu outbreak inside border detentions, but it was ultimately scrapped by administration lawyers.

CORONAVIRUS RESOURCES

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- [What We Know About the Virus](#)
- [Information on Coronavirus en Español](#)
- [Navigating Your Life During a Pandemic](#)
- [A Guide to State Coronavirus Reopenings](#)

People close to the president said they expect Mr. Trump to tout his immigration restrictions in speeches and campaign events in the coming months, underscoring his belief they will resonate with his supporters and appeal to a broader audience as [concern over the coronavirus pandemic](#) mounts. One Trump adviser said the restrictions were “red meat” for Mr. Trump’s base.

“It’s going to be hard for the Trump administration to let go of these measures, which have public-health rationale but also accomplish goals they’ve always wanted to see,” said Andrew Selee, president of the Migration Policy Institute, a Washington think tank.

China, where the virus is believed to have originated, promises to figure heavily in the campaign. Mr. Trump is already sparring with Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic

Party presidential nominee, over who has been tougher on Beijing. The president's travel restriction on China is among his most central talking points in this debate.

White House trade adviser Peter Navarro, who advocated for tariffs on Chinese imports, cited the coronavirus pandemic in making the case for a China travel ban in early memos to the president, according to a person familiar with the matter, arguing that the virus could kill hundreds of thousands of Americans and cost trillions of dollars. Mr. Navarro didn't respond to a request for comment.

China skeptics, meanwhile, approach immigration policy as another tool in countering China's rising influence, one that would dovetail with an administration effort to confront Beijing. Mr. Cotton is but one of a number of people in Congress and the Trump administration who see tightened restrictions on student visas as a way to curtail Chinese access to scientific expertise or sensitive technology at American universities.

The southern border, however, remains the centerpiece of the administration's ambitions for tightened immigration policies and has been the president's focus since his supporters chanted "build the wall" at his 2016 rallies.

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Should immigration restrictions be extended past the pandemic? Why or why not? Join the conversation below.

Since then, cutting immigration across the southern border has formed a through line for Mr. Trump's presidency, leading to the adoption of policies including the separation of migrant children from their parents.

In late January, when the administration was beginning to form its response to the virus, a working group at the Department of Homeland Security began meeting to discuss how to prevent the virus from entering the U.S. One senior administration official said internal briefings painted a picture of a "perfect epidemiological nightmare" that risked infecting federal agents and overrunning hospitals in border cities.

Shortly after those early briefings, the president told supporters at a February rally in South Carolina: "We must understand that border security is also health security."

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