TRUMP PUSHES BILL TO CUT NUMBER OF GREEN CARDS ISSUED BY HALF

Proposal would prioritize high-skilled workers, English speakers and those who are financially stable

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WASHINGTON – President Donald Trump on Wednesday embraced a Senate proposal to cut the number of green cards issued annually by half, as part of his drive to reduce legal as well as illegal immigration into the U.S.

The measure, sponsored by Republican Sens. Tom Cotton of Arkansas and David Perdue of Georgia, would maintain the existing number of employment-based green cards issued each year, but would sharply reduce immigration based on family ties, and it would end a lottery that gives people from underrepresented countries a chance to emigrate to the U.S.

The issue divides Republicans. Those from the party's pro-business wing generally support increased immigration, while others say newcomers provide unfair competition for U.S. workers. Mr. Trump's presidential campaign advanced the second argument.

Mr. Trump met Wednesday morning in the Roosevelt Room of the White House with the two senators, giving the bill introduction – often a sleepy affair – a high-profile platform.

The bill would replace the existing system with an application process prioritizing high-skilled workers, English speakers and newcomers who are financially stable enough to avoid relying on the welfare system, Mr. Trump said. It would reallocate the 140,000 green cards currently available based on employment.

The bill also would deny green cards, also known as legal permanent residence permits, to some who are now eligible, including the adult children and extended family of current green-card holders.

"For decades, the U.S. has operated a very low-skilled immigration system," Mr. Trump said. "It has not been fair to our people, to our citizens, to our workers."

The president added, "This competitive application process will favor applicants who can speak English, financially support themselves and their families, and demonstrate skills that will contribute to our economy."

The U.S. issues about a million green cards a year under current law. About two-thirds of those are issued to people with family ties to individuals already in the U.S., and fewer than one-fifth of the total are employment-based. The rest are issued via lottery, to refugees and on other grounds.

A Cotton aide said the sponsors estimate the legislation would decrease overall immigration to about 638,000 in its first year – a 41 percent drop – and to about 540,000 by its 10th year – a 50 percent reduction.

The proposal is unlikely to advance. An earlier version of the bill, introduced in February, didn't attract broad support. This type of legislation needs 60 votes to surmount a filibuster, with Democrats and some Senate Republicans likely opposed. Many lawmakers support the family-based immigration rules, which aid those already in the country who want to bring loved ones to the U.S.

Messrs. Perdue and Cotton say their proposal would boost the wages of the working-class Americans by restricting migration of low-skilled workers and prioritizing those with advanced skills, similar to systems in place in Australia and Canada.

The proposal is "proven to work," Mr. Perdue said. "This is not an experiment."

Australia's and Canada's systems offer a greater proportion of admissions based on employment than the U.S. does.

Many economists and business interests argue that immigration provides a net benefit to the American economy and have urged the administration not to introduce new barriers to migrants seeking to enter the country legally.

The bill would give the immediate family members of U.S. residents priority in seeking to emigrate to the country, including spouses and minor children. But it would end that preference for adult children and extended family members.

The bill also would eliminate the existing Diversity Visa lottery system, a lottery by which people from underrepresented countries can win green cards. It would also limit the number of permanent resident permits issued to refugees to 50,000 a year, well below the numbers admitted in the final years of the Obama administration. Sponsors say that the lower limit is in line with the average number of refugees granted residency over the past 13 years.

Speaking to reporters in the Roosevelt Room, as aides looked on, Mr. Trump called the bill "the most significant reform to our immigration system in half a century." Trump strategist Steve Bannon, a driver of Mr. Trump's "America first" agenda, was among those in attendance.

Mr. Cotton struck a different tone a few minutes later outside the White House. "We're not trying to boil the ocean here," he said, in response to questions about the likelihood that the bill could become law. The proposal to curb green cards is a "relatively modest, incremental step," Mr. Cotton said.

A White House aide defended the administration's proposal in a combative briefing with reporters Wednesday afternoon, denouncing questions about whether the proposal would undermine the U.S.'s historical role as a destination for people in need. The aide, Stephen Miller, is a longtime proponent of a reduction in immigration who previously worked for Attorney General Jeff Sessions when Mr. Sessions served as a senator from Alabama.

"Maybe it's time we had compassion for American workers," Mr. Miller said in response to a reporter who asked for evidence that immigration was depressing American workers' wages.

Opponents of the measure said the bill would undermine the compassion that some see as central to the U.S. immigration system, and pointed to the pro-immigration views of many economists.

Jeremy Robbins, executive director of the advocacy group New American Economy, said his group supports more merit-based immigration but not a reduction in other types. "The notion that…you need to dramatically reduce low-skilled immigration is not only unsupported by economics, it's contradicted by it," he said.

Anti-immigration organizations praised the bill on Wednesday. The proposal "will do more than any other action to fulfill President Trump's promises as a candidate to create an immigration system that puts the interests of American workers first," said Roy Beck, president of NumbersUSA, which supports reduced immigration, in a written statement.