

Trump suggested changing U.S. legal immigration policy during his Joint Congressional Address

Current U.S. immigration policy



Current priorities of U.S. immigration policy

- 1. **Family reunification** →
- 2. Admission of persons with needed skills (usually starts with a work visa then moves on to legal permanent resident "LPR" status)
- 3. Refugee protection
- 4. Country-of-origin diversity ("visa lottery")

Family-based immigration:

- As of 2014, family-based immigration made up **two-thirds of all legal permanent immigration**
- Family reunification is outlined in the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA)
- There are five family-based admission categories that vary according to individual characteristics such as the legal status of the U.S.-based relative, and the age, family relationship and marital status of the prospective immigrant
- The INA places a **limit on total family-based admissions** for any single country
- However, U.S. citizens may sponsor immediate family members (spouses, minor children and parents) for visas that are not subject to any caps—these cases are usually handled within 4 to 5 months

Sources: William Kandel, "U.S. family-based immigration policy," Congressional Research Service, November 19, 2014; Dara Lind, "Trump's call for merit-based immigration, explained," Vox, March 1, 2017.

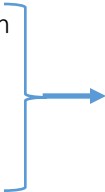
The majority of U.S. immigrants are admitted on the basis of family reunification

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Non-familial avenues for U.S. immigration:

- While the vast majority of U.S. immigrants are granted entry based on family ties, there are three other ways to get legal permanent resident status
- **Less than one-fifth of U.S. immigrants are currently admitted through job-based preferences** (priority #2)
- In 2014 13% of immigrants came with refugee or asylum status and an additional 5% were admitted through the diversity lottery (priorities #3 and #4)
- There is a yearly cap of 140,000 immigrants (including eligible spouses and minor unmarried children) admitted on an employment basis (priority #2)
- 2016's refugee cap was 85,000—this number is determined yearly by the president in consultation with Congress
- The "diversity visa" program (priority #4) was created in 1990 as a dedicated channel for immigrants from countries with low rates of immigration to the U.S.
- Each year 55,000 diversity visas are allocated randomly to nationals from countries that have sent less than 50,000 immigrants to the U.S. in the previous 5 years

Sources: William Kandel, "U.S. family-based immigration policy," Congressional Research Service, November 19, 2014; Dara Lind, "Trump's call for merit-based immigration, explained," Vox, March 1, 2017.

Trump's reference to merit-based immigration resembles a proposal made in 2007 that died in the Senate

How a merit-based immigration system works

Here is what Trump said about merit-based immigration:

"Nations around the world, like **Canada, Australia** and many others have a merit-based immigration system. It is a basic principle that **those seeking to enter a country ought to be able to support themselves financially**. Yet, in America, we do not enforce this rule, straining the very public resources that our poorest citizens rely upon. According to the National Academy of Sciences, our current immigration system costs America's taxpayers many billions of dollars a year.

Switching away from this current system of lower-skilled immigration, and instead adopting a merit-based system, will have many benefits: it will save countless dollars, raise workers' wages, and help struggling families — including immigrant families — enter the middle class."



Canada's merit-based immigration

Immigrants are awarded **points** according to:

- Educational and employment background
- Language proficiency
- Financial means

The highest scorers get priority for admission.



Financial self-sufficiency

A similar merit system was proposed in 2007 under President Bush, but it died in the Senate.

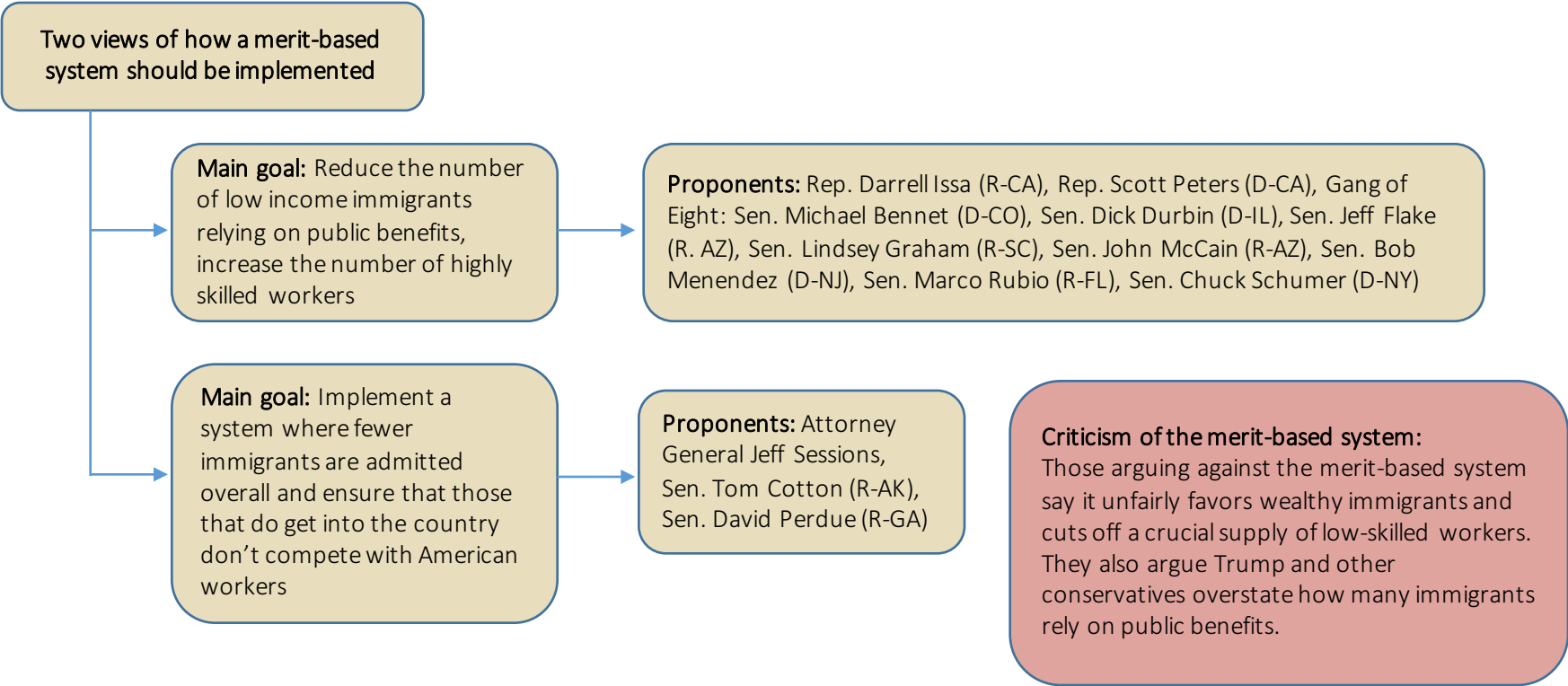
Under the 2007 proposal:

- Employment attributes like education and skills accounted for more points than family relationships—so employment-based visas would have significantly increased and preference for family members of legal U.S. residents would be reduced
- Temporary workers would have been barred from bringing family members unless they accepted a shorter term visa and could show they would not become **primarily dependent on government benefits**
- Trump's mention of financial self-sufficiency seemed to suggest he would favor this kind of standard

Sources: "Donal Trump's Congress speech (full text)," CNN, March 1, 2017; William Kandel, "U.S. family-based immigration policy," Congressional Research Service, November 19, 2014; Dara Lind, "Trump's call for merit-based immigration, explained," Vox, March 1, 2017.

Proponents of the merit-based system do not necessarily agree on what the system would look like in practice

Different interpretations of what a merit-based system means



Sources: William Kandel, "U.S. family-based immigration policy," Congressional Research Service, November 19, 2014; Dara Lind, "Trump's call for merit-based immigration, explained," Vox, March 1, 2017; Octavio Blanco, "Trump's merit-based system: who would get in?" CNN, March 3, 2017.