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President Trump Reduced Legal Immigration. He Did Not Reduce Illegal Immigration

By Alex Nowrasteh

President Trump entered the White House with the goal of reducing legal immigration by 63 percent. Trump was wildly successful in reducing legal immigration. By November 2020, the Trump administration reduced the number of green cards issued to people abroad by at least 418,453 and the number of non-immigrant visas by at least 11,178,668 during his first term through November 2020. President Trump also entered the White House with the goal of eliminating illegal immigration but Trump oversaw a virtual collapse in interior immigration enforcement and the stabilization of the illegal immigrant population. Thus, Trump succeeded in reduce legal immigration and failed to eliminate illegal immigration.

Figure 1 shows the monthly number of green cards issued to immigrants outside of the United States. In most years, about half of all green cards are issued to immigrants who already reside in the United States on another visa. Thus, the number of green cards issued to immigrants abroad is a better metric of the annual inflow of lawful permanent residents than the total number issued. Trump cut the average number of monthly green cards issued by 18.2 percent relative to Obama's second term, but that average monthly decline hides the virtual end of legal immigration from April 2020 onward.

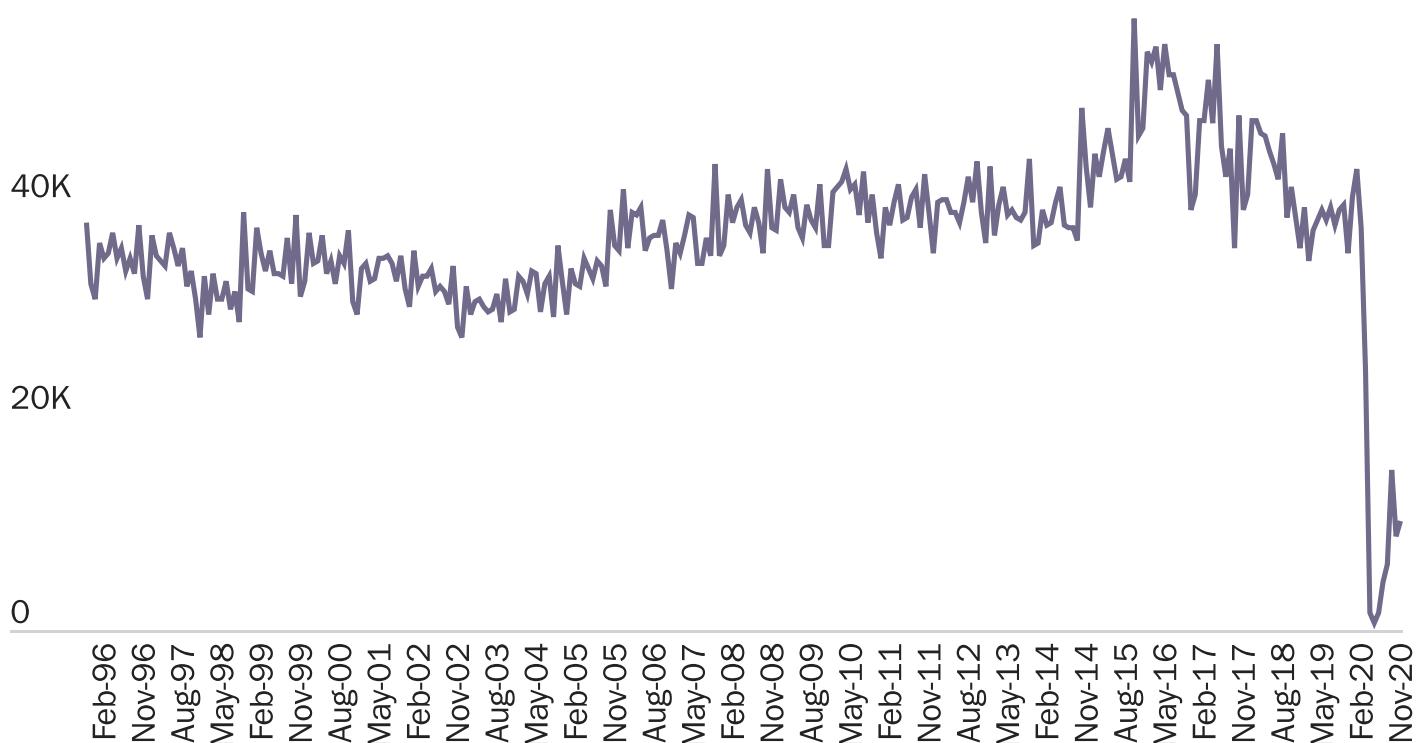
In response to the recession and the COVID-19 outbreak, President Trump virtually ended the issuance of green cards to people abroad. In the last 6 months of the 2020 fiscal year (April- September 2020) the U.S. government only issued about 29,000 green cards. In the same period in 2016, the U.S. government issued approximately 309,000 green cards. Compared to the last half of FY2016, the number of green cards issued in the last half of FY2020 fell by 90.5 percent (please see note at the end of this blog post for how I estimated these figures).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic during the period from January 2017-February 2020, the average number of green cards issued per month was only down about 0.5 percent under Trump compared to from January 2013- February 2016 under the Obama administration with cumulative numbers down just over 3.2 percent. Beginning in mid-to-late March, the Trump administration virtually halted the issuance of green cards to people abroad. Without the COVID-19 immigration restrictions unilaterally imposed by the President, the issuance of green cards to foreigners abroad would have barely declined relative to the second term of the Obama administration.

Figure 1

Monthly Immigrant Visas (Green Cards) Issued to Immigrants Abroad, October 1995–November 2020

60K



Sources: Department of State, Author's Calculations.

Figure 2 shows the monthly number of non-immigrant visas (NIVs) issued abroad. NIVs include tourist visas, work visas, student visas, and others that do not allow the migrant to naturalize. Trump cut the monthly average number of NIVs by about 27 percent relative to Obama's second term, but that decline obscures the virtual end of NIVs from April 2020 onward.

As with immigrant visas, President Trump virtually ended NIV issuance in response to the recession and the COVID-19 outbreak. In the last 6 months of the 2020 fiscal year (April–September 2020) the U.S. government only issued 397,596 NIVs. In the same period in 2016, the U.S. government issued more than 5.6 million NIVs. Compared to the last half of FY2016, the number NIVs issued in the last half of FY2020 fell by almost 93 percent (please see note at the end of this blog post for how I estimated these figures).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, during the period from January 2017–February 2020, the average number of monthly NIVs issued was down about 12 percent under Trump compared to the January 2013–February 2016 period under the Obama administration and the cumulative numbers were down by just over 14 percent. Beginning in mid- to late March, the Trump administration virtually halted the issuance of NIVs to people abroad. The COVID-19-related restrictions were the most severe and impactful part of Trump's immigration policy.

Looking at the decline in the number of visas issued abroad under Trump through November 2020 compared to the second term of the Obama administration, Trump reduced the number of green cards issued by approximately 418,453 green cards and the number of NIVs issued by about 11,178,668. That's a roughly 18 percent decline in the number of green cards issued abroad and approximately a 28 percent decline in the number of NIVs issued during Trump's only term relative to Obama's second term.



Although Trump succeeded in cutting legal immigration more than he initially planned, he oversaw the collapse of interior immigration enforcement. In 2020, the removal of illegal immigrants from the interior of the United States was the lowest as an absolute number and as a share of the illegal immigration population since ICE was created in 2003 (Figure 3). Trump failed to increase removals because local jurisdictions refused to cooperate with his administration, continuing a trend begun during the Obama administration in response to their deportation efforts. As a result, the population of illegal immigrants remained about the same as when he took office (Figure 4).



Note

Figures 1 and 2 are based on Department of State monthly visa issuance statistics. However, the numbers are estimates prior to March 2017 for immigrant visas and NIVs using the seasonal variations in the known years plus random variation added to make it look natural. I then checked the monthly results against the known annual totals and they are within 1 percent, so good enough for a visualization. This blog post is an expansion on [work](#) by my colleague David Bier where I add more monthly data.

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