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Trump Administration Tightens Legal Migration

- The Trump Administration continues to act and legislate in a way intended to reduce migration to the U.S., as expected based on campaign pledges.
- The White House has announced plans to lower the number of H-1B work visas issued each year and replace the random lottery with a system that skews toward selecting higher-wage migrants for H-1B visas.
- Any change to the H1-B system that disproportionately impacts Indian nationals, who account for around 70 percent of all H-1B visas issued each year.
- If H-1B visas are harder to obtain, Indian migrants may move to other countries with more relaxed work permit systems instead.
- Other work-based visas such as H-2A, H-2B, and L-1A/L-1B visas may be subject to change, and nationals disproportionately using those visas will be impacted.

Executive Summary

The Trump Administration has pursued a more hawkish stance on immigration and border security than its predecessor. The focus until recently had been irregular immigration, with more enforcement at the U.S.-Mexico border, and more crackdowns within the U.S. by agencies such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE.) The White House is now eyeing the legal migration system, with the H-1B visa of particular interest. The H1-B was originally introduced to allow companies to employ foreign skilled workers due to a lack of skilled American applicants in that area of the economy.(i) Since its introduction in 1990, the H-1B visa has been dominated by Indian nationals, who account for 70 percent of the H-1B visas awarded each fiscal year.(ii) The current system sets a yearly cap, and visas are awarded based on a lottery-style system. The Trump Administration has planned to reduce the quotas and skew the system away from a random lottery toward more high-skilled workers.(iii)

Analysis and Implications

Indian Nationals Will be Disproportionately Impacted

Around 70 percent of H-1B visas are given to Indian nationals. While all potential and current H-1B visa holders could be impacted by changes to the visa, Indians will be the most impacted.



Changes to H-1B May Push Indian Migrants To Seek Other Countries to Move To

If the U.S. is perceived as being too difficult to obtain a visa for, Indian (and other nationalities) skilled workers may look for other countries to move to instead.

H-1B Visa Restrictions Could Incentivize Irregular Indian Migration to the U.S.

If Indian nationals are unwilling or unable to obtain a H-1B visa, this may create an incentive to enter the U.S. via irregular means. During the Biden Administration, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) encountered over 30,000 Indians in fiscal year (FY) 2021, increasing to over 60,000 in FY 2022, and peaking at 96,000 in FY 2023. The smuggling routes could reactivate to respond to demand.

Companies May be Less Likely to Use H1-B Visas

If H1-B visas are more restricted, this could lead U.S. employers to either recruit within the country itself or seek out alternative visa pathways for skilled migrants, such as the O-1 visa.

Legislation on Other Work Visas May be Forthcoming

It remains possible that the White House may also legislate on other work-based visas, and most likely in a way to restrict their use and number. This has implications for visas such as H-2A visas (agricultural workers), H-2B (seasonal workers), and the L-1A/L-1B (inter-company transfers) could also be reformed, with implications for nationals disproportionately using them.

Orunmila Research is a consultancy specializing in migration analysis, international affairs, and geopolitical risk. We provide independent, evidence-based, data-driven analysis at the intersection of migration, conflict, and policy. We help governments, NGOs, and institutions understand the deeper, complex drivers behind border movements and instability to allow for a more informed and impactful debate.

Sources and References

- i) Pew Research Center. What we know about the U.S. H-1B Visa Program.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/03/04/what-we-know-about-the-us-h-1b-visa-program/>
- ii) Ibid.
- iii) Trump Administration Plans Changes to Skilled Worker Visas and Citizenship Tests.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/25/us/trump-visas-h1b-citizenship-tests.html>



- iv) U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Nationwide Encounters.
<https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/nationwide-encounters>