

WHO SUPPORTS THE PUBLIC CHARGE RULE?

ANALYSIS OF COMMENTS IN FAVOR OF A MORE RESTRICTIVE IMMIGRATION POLICY

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A [proposed rule](#) from the White House would make it harder for legal immigrants who receive public assistance, such as Medicaid, food stamps and housing subsidies, to become permanent residents in order to live and work in the United States. In this policy brief we analyze a sample of public comments posted to regulations.gov to better understand who supports this restrictive policy proposal.

Comment Analysis

As required by federal law, government agencies must allow time for the public to submit “written data, views, or arguments” regarding a proposed rule. In the case of the proposal entitled “Inadmissibility on Public Charge Grounds” rule change, the comment period lasted a total of two months (from October 10th - December 10th, 2018), during which time a total of 266,077 comments were posted. As of January 2019, only a small fraction (22,500) had been made publicly available.

Probably as a result of aggressive outreach campaigns by immigrant advocacy groups, comments posted to regulations.gov about the Public Charge proposal were overwhelmingly *opposed* to the changes proposed by the Trump Administration. In order to create an analysis sample¹ of 1,000 comments by writers who both supported and opposed the restrictive changes to the Public Charge Rule we began by downloading 23,026 posted comments and stratifying them by anonymous vs. signed comments. We retained all of the 520 anonymous comments (because they were more likely to be in favor of the restrictive policy), and then randomly selected 480 signed comments. Even with this action, only 85 (9%) of the 1,000 comments in the analysis sample were in support of the Public Charge proposal; 911 (91)% were opposed, and 4 (0.4%) were neutral or mixed.

¹ Because supportive comments were underrepresented, we followed the following procedures to create a file of 1,000 cases for detailed analysis of supportive and oppositional comments. On January 26, 2019 we drew a random sample of 23,026 comments and deleted comments that were unrelated to Public Charge (such as 33 comments protesting a particular visa program). We then stratified the remaining cases into anonymous comments (n=526) and signed comments (n=22,500). In order to have enough supportive comments to analyze, we retained all 526 anonymous comments and then completed the sample of 1,000 by randomly selecting 480 (2.1%) of the signed comments.

In this brief we present the results of an in-depth analysis of the 85 supportive comments.

Key Findings: Individual Comments in Support of the Rule

Perceived economic threat is one of the most important predictors of prejudice toward immigrants in the United States². One component of this threat is the belief that immigrants will take jobs from native-born citizens.³ In our sample of favorable comments regarding the Public Charge proposal, perceived *economic threats* were the predominant theme:

A second component of economic threat is the view that Immigrants are draining the welfare system. The generally erroneous assumption is that immigrants do not pay taxes, and thus have a negative impact on the US economy. Behind this is the conviction that public funds are finite, and that, if immigrants receive public assistance, there will be less money available to support more deserving US-born residents. As one anonymous writer put it, "Citizens should not have to work harder to pay for people here that are not citizens." Interestingly, several of the individuals expressing these views were themselves immigrants.

Anonymous 70: I [was] an immigrant once, and i support this proposal because nowadays lots of immigrant they are abusing the benefit, and we are the one who pay the taxes for those people to abuse the benefit.

Anonymous 370: As a first generation legal immigrant and naturalized citizen I approve this rule. In the countries across the world USA is envisioned as some place where all the problems get automatically solved once you get there.

A few writers who identify themselves as immigrants or the children of immigrants contrast their values and work ethic with what they perceive of as abuse of the system by more recent immigrants.

Adriana Edwards: As a born American and a child of an immigrant that is now a legal citizen of the US, I am appalled by the lackluster of many immigrants in our country. My family and myself have always worked hard and pays our taxes. My father, originally from Mexico, refused any government assistance of any kind and supported the family by working 2 jobs if needed...

² Jetten, Jolanda, and Victoria M. Esses. "The Reception of Immigrants and Refugees in Western Countries: The Challenges of Our Time." *Journal of Social Issues* 74, no. 4 (2018): 662-673.

³ Kiehne, Elizabeth, and Cecilia Ayon. "Friends Or Foes: The Impact of Policical Ideology and Immigrant Friends on Anti-Immigrant Sentiment." *J. Soc. & Soc. Welfare* 43 (2016): 135.

The same writer goes on to disparage welfare as supporting individuals who are “leaches” who don’t want to work.

Attitudes toward Welfare. Americans disagree sharply over the degree to which immigrants—particularly those who are not undocumented—should be eligible for government goods and services that may be available to native-born Americans.⁴ Public Charge comments reflect this divide. Furthermore, because the Public Charge rule is about the use of means-tested benefits it taps negative attitudes about welfare use in general.

Anonymous³⁷⁰ (cited earlier): I personally witnessed what a generous social assistance makes out of people - as soon as they are provided with the basic needs, they lose interest in making any effort to better themselves and society. Even if benefits are provided, these should be time- and value-limited so that someone in difficult situation can get temporary help and get back to work.

Other individuals are opposed to *any* benefits for immigrants, and argue that the result is to privilege foreigners over needy Americans and to foster dependence.

Anonymous 85: Why should they get benefits when Americans have to work full time just to barely survive, and they get free handouts? I work full time, raising 2 grandkids, supporting my disabled daughter and granddaughter.

Anonymous 463: America needs to support Americans. We need to help our poor, our weak and our hungry. But that's not happening. What is happening, is our tax dollars are being used to fund foreigners instead of our homeless. This must stop.

Carla Larson Tucke: SNAP, Medicaid, TANF and AFDC are all benefits of being American Citizens. Illegal immigrants and legal immigrants not yet granted citizenship, refugees and asylum seekers are not entitled to any benefits or rights. The system is already over burdened and there is a lot of fraud. We have American citizens who are homeless, children who go hungry. We can't afford to feed other people's children and house other people. If you want to come to America, you need to do it the way all of our ancestors had to do it, namely be able to pay for your passage, pay for your lodgings and have a skill that translates into a job that we have available. In the past immigration was not about freeloading and expecting hardworking citizens to pay your way

⁴ Garand, James C., Ping Xu, and Belinda C. Davis. "Immigration attitudes and support for the welfare state in the American mass public." *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 1 (2017): 146-162.

The Virtue of Self-Reliance Americans tend to ascribe positive traits to individuals whom they identify as economically self-reliant or successful.⁵ In some cases this is seen as a characteristic of earlier waves of white, European immigrants, contrasted with contemporary immigrants from other regions.

Candace Hartman: The fundamental principle of self-reliance has been the cornerstone of the American Dream for generations. That dream is now in danger... I fully support the Trump Administrations proposed common-sense rule that will enforce a long-held belief that any person unable to take care of himself or herself should not be allowed passage to America. MUST take care of American Citizens before taking care of outsiders!!!!

Anonymous 106 reinforces the negative stereotype of self-sufficient Americans contrasted with foreign ‘welfare collectors’ who take advantage of US programs:

“We cannot continue to allow America to become the world's welfare state. We are a nation of self-sufficient citizens, not forever welfare collectors. America is not a charity organization.”

Nationalist views that promote identification with one’s own culture to the exclusion of others are associated with the perception of immigrants as a threat to American national identity. Furthermore, nationalism reinforces partisan divides because ardent nationalists are more likely to self-identify as strong Republicans than as Democrats⁶. An extreme example is voiced by the following individual who sees “open borders” as a globalist Democratic plot:

Anonymous 310: Please do not fold because of some Soros MSM⁷ propaganda mission so quickly. That only makes them benefit from their bad behavior and endanger more children, both UAC's⁸ and Americans who have already succumbed to diseases brought in and hidden under Obama. Thank you. I support the stopping of all incentives that make use of public resources for illegal aliens. I support what we give to their countries, provided conditions and benchmarks are used to stop the flow of money to Mullahs and Joe Biden's children's Chinese business deals he made, along with John Kerry. It’s time to enact all tools in the shed to save the children of America, and of other nations from nefarious greed of the many corrupt leaders in DC.

⁵ Garand, James C., Ping Xu, and Belinda C. Davis. "Immigration attitudes and support for the welfare state in the American mass public." *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 1 (2017): 146-162.

⁶ Bonikowski, Bart, and Paul DiMaggio. "Varieties of American popular nationalism." *American Sociological Review* 81, no. 5 (2016): 949-980.

⁷ Mainstream media

⁸ Unaccompanied children

James Hamilton: Unauthorized immigrants are U.S. criminals. They are illegal aliens. The League of Women Voters is undermining our sovereign nation by creating new Democratic voters who are not American citizens.

But not all supporters of the Trump Public Charge Proposal are Republicans. Anonymous 421 says that s/he is a Democrat who has worked as an assistant in an immigration law firm for six years and has seen rampant fraud:

This law needs to be enacted as soon as possible so government resources can be made available to the elderly, veterans, and other US citizens whose families broke their backs to find. This loose and no consequence system of benefits also attracts illegal immigrants who simply want a free ride. It encourages them to breed at an unsustainable rate and our government and tax payers pick up the bill for their multiple children.

When individuals view issues in moralistic terms, the result is more extreme and rigid views⁹. This can be seen in harshly negative attitudes toward so-called “*illegal* immigrants”. Although undocumented immigrants are not eligible for means-tested benefits, and are therefore not directly impacted by proposed changes in the Public Charge Rule, several individuals in our sample are either ignorant of this distinction, or believe that immigrants are receiving benefits fraudulently.

Policy Implications

Supporters of the proposed Public Charge Rule as described in this paper represent a tiny minority of the many thousands of individuals who sent comments about the policy to regulations.gov. Nevertheless, their views fit within a framework of social science research on the causes of negative attitudes toward immigrants, and the blurring of distinctions between so-called “legal and illegal immigrants”. Most of the comments represent categorical judgments---that is, “an up or down decision on the desirability of the policy as a whole, applied uniformly and irrespective of situational particulars.”¹⁰

Categorical judgments are difficult to alter with educational programs and policies since they are most often espoused by individuals who hold deep-seated partisan beliefs about immigration. This is particularly true in 2019, when several members of the Trump administration, and the President himself promote erroneous negative stereotypes of immigrants.

For those individuals who base their judgments on perceived *attributes* rather than hardened negative views, there is hope that attitudes can change by the spread of information that debunks myths about immigrants, and by the implementation of

⁹ Wright, Matthew, Morris Levy, and Jack Citrin. "Public attitudes toward immigration policy across the legal/illegal divide: The role of categorical and attribute-based decision-making." *Political Behavior* 38, no. 1 (2016): 229-253.

¹⁰ *ibid*

policies that promote direct contact between immigrants and the native born so that attitudes can be shaped by observation of similarities and differences, rather than by ideology alone.