

Trump doesn't recognize foreign-born black and brown people as American

By Carly Goodman

The Diversity Visa lottery has been an incredibly successful policy, beyond the expectations or even the intentions of its creators. Since 1995 it has diversified the source countries of immigrants to the United States. In particular it has brought in more immigrants from [African countries](#) that historically were restricted from sending many immigrants to the U.S.

It is a small program — it issues about 50,000 immigrant visas annually in a system that each year admits about one million lawful permanent residents — that packs a big punch.

The program benefits the United States. It does this by bringing ambitious dreamers to our communities and economy and by inspiring global good will, by providing people with an image of the United States outside of its martial and economic dominance.

Each year, millions play the lottery because they believe that the United States is a generous, diverse country where immigrants are welcomed.

The White House has demanded that the lottery be eliminated. [President Trump](#)'s reasoning is couched in national security terms, but it's obvious that he is motivated by suspicion and disdain for immigrants and is determined to curtail immigration from non-white [parts of the world](#).

Trump seems unable to recognize foreign-born people, particularly black and brown people, as American, regardless of residency or citizenship. He understands whiteness as a necessary feature of American identity.

Trump confirmed this in his comments that the U.S. should admit more immigrants from places like Norway rather than from African countries. This is a disturbing echo of our country's history of using racist criteria to determine immigration policy.

The [White House framework](#) on immigration, if adopted into law, would ensure that our immigration system reflects these odious ideas.

The visa lottery is a special, effective part of the immigration system that should not be traded away to satisfy this exclusionary vision of American identity.

The visa lottery is one of the few avenues for independent immigrants — people who dream of living in America, but who don't have U.S. citizen family members to sponsor them.

Because so few Africans have voluntarily immigrated to the U.S. historically, they represent a [small but rapidly growing share](#) of American immigrants, coming disproportionately through the diversity visa lottery.

Since the lottery's inception in 1990, the number of African immigrants has [doubled each decade](#), and now about 2 million African immigrants live in the United States. Africans receive about [44 percent](#) of diversity visas annually, and Africans have been the majority of diversity visa immigrants in the lifetime of the program. (Europeans also win about a third of diversity visas; in 2017 nine people even came from Norway).

Given the president's criticism of the program, it might surprise him to learn that the lottery was conceived of [in the late 1980s](#) to make it easier for [people from Europe](#) to get immigrant visas — something that had become more challenging than in previous generations.

The U.S. immigration system had long favored white Europeans. From the country's first naturalization law in 1790 that limited citizenship to "free white persons," to the exclusion of Chinese immigrants beginning in 1882, to the racialized "national origins" quota system erected in the 1920s that favored Western European immigrants and excluded Asian immigrants, the United States long regulated immigration along unapologetically racist criteria.

In 1965, Congress changed the outdated and overtly racist national origins quotas, which [have been praised](#) by current Attorney General [Jeff Sessions](#), as the basis of the immigration system, replacing it with a new system that prioritized family relationships.

Centering the system on [family unification](#) recognized that families would serve as a source of stability for newcomers, and some lawmakers thought that white Europeans would continue to constitute the majority of immigrants.

They didn't. Because of shifting demands for visas, people from Latin American and Asian countries came to form the majority of immigrants.

By the late 1980s, Congress members were open to the argument that it should be easier for white Europeans to immigrate. When a group of undocumented Irish immigrants [lobbied for a visa category](#) that would make it possible for people to immigrate without family members in the U.S. to sponsor them, Congress created several temporary lotteries in the late 1980s and early 1990s that explicitly favored the Irish.

Policymakers argued that this would diversify U.S. immigration because Europeans had become "underrepresented" in the immigrant population.

The permanent version of the Diversity Visa lottery was created as part of the Immigration Act of 1990, with input from policymakers of both parties. Since its introduction in 1994, the annual lottery has been unexpectedly popular in Africa.

In contrast to European countries then introducing more stringent immigration regulations, the United States appeared open and generous.

Each autumn cities and towns around the world are papered over with posters, flyers, and banners with the American flag and the Statue of Liberty, advertising the chance to enter the American lottery.

During the month-long registration period, motivated people apply online. They must meet certain criteria, including being from an eligible country (any country that has sent fewer than 50,000 immigrants to the U.S. over the previous five years), and possessing a high school diploma, its equivalent, or trained work experience.

In the spring, the United States selects about 100,000 "winners" and invites them to apply for a visa.

Then a person must provide detailed information to the U.S. embassy, submit to visa interviews and background checks, and pay a non-refundable application fee, just like any other immigrant applicant. Of the millions of people who "play" the lottery — 19 million applied in 2017 — only around 50,000 people receive the diversity visa.

One man named "Atabe" in Bamenda, Cameroon works at a cyber café, helping neighbors enter the lottery. He has played the lottery since he was a child, then included on his parents' application. When lottery winners have returned to his café to tell him the good news, he felt like he was exploding with joy for them.

He called the lottery a "life changing situation" and likened winning the lottery with going to heaven.

Once in the United States, diversity visa immigrants, like all people who have the courage to pick up and move far from home tend to want to make the most of the opportunity.

The visa lottery has created a more racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse America. Acquiescing to Trump's demand to end the lottery would mean dramatically curtailing the immigration of non-white people and to return to an [explicitly nativist system](#) of immigration.

By projecting an image of a generous and diverse United States, the visa lottery has unexpectedly created [goodwill abroad](#).

Even as the president undermines it with his rhetoric, policy priorities, cruel treatment of immigrants, and contempt for people of color, this is an image the United States should aspire to in its policies.

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<http://thehill.com/opinion/immigration/371601-trump-cant-seem-to-recognize-foreign-born-black-and-brown-people-as>