When the Border Follows You: America's New Politics of Immigration and Belonging

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(Jacek Boczarski - Anadolu Agency)

America's border no longer ends at the border. Since Donald Trump returned to the White House in January 2025, his administration has steadily expanded the reach of immigration enforcement, from entry restrictions to continued scrutiny of those already granted visas. In August 2026, the State Department said it had revoked more than 175,000 visas during his second term, citing offences ranging from fraud and visa violations to criminal activity and national-security concerns. The striking number points to a bigger change: admission to America is increasingly being treated not as a settled decision, but as one that can be revisited.

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The administration has expanded screening beyond the point at which a visa is issued, or a traveller enters the country. Visa holders are increasingly subject to continued scrutiny, while immigration decisions are more frequently framed through national-security and public-safety considerations. At the same time, restrictions on entry, asylum and other migration channels have been accompanied by extensive use of executive orders, presidential proclamations and departmental directives.

These changes have also reached areas that traditionally sit beyond immigration enforcement. Attempts to narrow birthright citizenship, a renewed emphasis on denaturalisation, and the use of national-security categories in citizenship debates suggest that the current policy shift concerns not only entry and removal, but also the legal boundaries of membership in the United States.

The result is a migration regime in which the distinction between border control, national security and citizenship policy is becoming less clear. The key question is no longer simply who can enter the United States. It is also who can remain, how secure legal status is once granted, how citizenship is defined and how far the executive branch can go in determining these questions.

Taken together, these measures amount to what might be described as an internalisation of the border. The traditional border decides whether a person may enter; the emerging model extends that logic beyond admission, allowing questions of security, eligibility and belonging to follow individuals after they have crossed it. The legal distinctions between visa holders, residents, naturalised citizens and citizens by birth remain substantial. But the policy trajectory increasingly subjects different stages of membership to a common logic of continuing scrutiny. The border, in this sense, is becoming less a single territorial checkpoint than an administrative process that can extend deeper into an individual's relationship with the state.

Visa Policy Moves Beyond the Point of Entry

The State Department's announcement that it revoked more than 175,000 visas offers a useful starting point for examining this shift. According to the Department, revocations involved foreign nationals accused of violating visa conditions, committing crimes, engaging in fraud, calling for violence or presenting national-security concerns. Assault, driving under the influence, theft and drug-related offences accounted for many of the cases linked to criminal conduct. The Department also identified more than 100 revocations connected to alleged "birth tourism".

Visa revocation is not new, nor does visa cancellation automatically mean that an individual already in the United States loses lawful immigration status. A visa



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generally determines whether a person may seek entry, whereas legal status inside the country is governed through separate immigration procedures.

What has changed is the breadth of the scrutiny applied to visa holders and applicants. The administration has placed greater emphasis on what it describes as continuous vetting. Under this approach, immigration screening does not necessarily end once a visa has been granted. Information obtained after admission, including law-enforcement encounters or activity considered relevant to national security, can prompt renewed scrutiny.

The State Department has also widened reviews of applicants' online activity. By 2026, expanded screening covered several categories of temporary migrants, including international students, exchange visitors and H-1B workers. In some cases, applicants were instructed to make social-media accounts publicly accessible during screening.

The Department has defended the policy in unusually explicit terms: every visa adjudication, it has argued, is a national-security decision.

That formulation captures an important change in emphasis. Visa policy has always contained a security component, but the current approach places security considerations closer to the centre of the immigration system. Admission increasingly looks less like a one-off administrative decision and more like a status that remains open to reassessment.

The same tendency appears in nationality-based restrictions. In June 2025, the administration imposed full entry restrictions on nationals of 12 countries and partial restrictions on another seven, citing problems involving identity management, security screening, information sharing and visa overstays. The framework was widened again later that year.

These measures extend the security logic that has long shaped debates around irregular migration into areas of legal mobility. Students, workers, and other visa holders may enter through lawful channels, but their presence is now subject to a more intensive and ongoing review process.

Immigration as a National-Security Question

The broader shift becomes clearer at the southern border. On 20 January 2025, Trump declared a national emergency there and directed the armed forces to provide additional support for border enforcement. Separate presidential measures described irregular migration as an "invasion" and linked the federal response to the President's constitutional authority to protect the country and the states against external threats.

The language matters because it does more than signal a preference for tighter border enforcement. It moves migration closer to the conceptual terrain of territorial defence and emergency governance.

Border policy has always involved questions of sovereignty, but the current administration has relied more extensively on authorities and institutional tools associated with national security. Military resources have been incorporated into border operations, cartels have been brought within terrorist-designation frameworks, and immigration restrictions have repeatedly been justified through emergency and security powers.

This has made the boundary between ordinary immigration administration and exceptional security policy increasingly difficult to draw.

This shift in vocabulary also changes immigration's institutional politics. Framing migration as a security threat does more than describe the problem differently; it expands the range of authorities that can plausibly be invoked to address it. Questions ordinarily governed through immigration statutes and administrative procedures become connected to presidential powers over emergencies, foreign affairs and national defence. Securitisation therefore has an institutional consequence: it can shift the centre of gravity in immigration policymaking away from Congress and towards the executive branch.

The scale of executive activity also deserves attention. According to the Migration Policy Institute, more than 500 immigration-related actions were introduced during the first year of Trump's second term. This exceeded the number recorded over the full four years of his first presidency. Dozens of those measures came directly through executive orders.

Congress has not passed a comprehensive law remaking the U.S. immigration system. Much of the current transformation has instead taken place through presidential proclamations, executive orders, agency guidance and changes to administrative enforcement.

That distinction has consequences. Immigration policy has always given presidents substantial discretion, particularly in admitting foreign nationals. Yet the current administration has pushed that discretion into a much wider range of policy areas, often using the language of emergency, security, or sovereignty to justify it.

Immigration has therefore become one of the main areas in which the practical limits of presidential authority are being contested.

The Debate Moves Into Citizenship

The most sensitive part of this shift concerns citizenship. Here, the administration has sought to carry the logic of immigration enforcement into territory where executive discretion is far more constrained.

On his first day back in office, Trump issued Executive Order 14160, which sought to prevent some children born in the United States from acquiring citizenship automatically when their parents were either unlawfully present or in the country on temporary status.

The move pushed the immigration debate into constitutional territory. It challenged the longstanding interpretation of the Citizenship Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and quickly became the subject of litigation.

In June 2026, the Supreme Court ruled in *Trump v. Barbara* that children born in the United States to parents who are undocumented or temporarily present remain within the protection of the Citizenship Clause.

The ruling placed a clear constitutional limit on the administration's effort to connect birthright citizenship to parental immigration status. It also showed where immigration-enforcement logic meets a qualitatively different legal category. Federal immigration law heavily regulates entry and residence. Birthright citizenship, by contrast, has a direct constitutional foundation.

The administration nevertheless returned to the issue in August 2026 with a narrower executive order. This version focused on specific categories that included children born to parents classified as "alien enemies", members of designated Foreign Terrorist Organisations, certain foreign officials and individuals accused of using commercial arrangements to secure U.S. citizenship for their children.

The new approach is narrower than the original order, but it raises a different question. National-security categories attached to parents are now being brought into a debate over the citizenship of children born in the United States.

The narrower approach has encountered judicial resistance of its own. In September 2026, a federal judge temporarily blocked the new order, arguing that the Supreme Court's earlier ruling had already settled important elements of the constitutional question. The decision is significant because it suggests that narrowing the categories covered by the policy does not necessarily resolve the underlying constitutional problem: executive classifications attached to parents cannot readily override citizenship protections enjoyed by their children.

That development is significant because it takes the migration-security relationship beyond admission and residence. Security classifications are beginning to influence arguments about the limits of political membership itself.



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Naturalised citizenship has also come under closer scrutiny. In June 2025, the Department of Justice instructed its Civil Division to prioritise legally viable denaturalisation cases. The stated priorities included terrorism, espionage, war crimes, organised crime, cartel activity, undisclosed serious offences and fraud.

Denaturalisation is subject to legal constraints. The government cannot simply revoke citizenship because of conduct it dislikes after naturalisation; it generally must establish that citizenship was unlawfully obtained or procured through material concealment or misrepresentation.

Even so, elevating denaturalisation as an enforcement priority contributes to a wider shift in the political and administrative environment surrounding citizenship. Questions once concentrated primarily on entry and deportation are increasingly appearing in debates over both the acquisition and retention of membership.

The progression is difficult to ignore. Security screening now reaches across entry, visa status, lawful residence, naturalisation and disputes over citizenship at birth. The categories remain legally distinct, but they are increasingly being discussed within the same policy vocabulary.

This creates what might be understood as a ladder of conditionality. At its lower rungs, the executive enjoys considerable discretion over entry and visa eligibility. As individuals move towards permanent residence and naturalisation, legal protections strengthen and the grounds for government intervention narrow. Citizenship by birth sits at the other end of the spectrum, protected directly by the Constitution. The significance of the administration's recent initiatives lies partly in their attempt to extend a security-based logic of reassessment progressively further up this ladder. The resulting litigation is therefore testing not merely individual immigration measures, but how far the conditionality associated with admission can travel into more secure forms of political membership.

The Courts Remain an Important Constraint

Executive discretion, however, has limits—and they become more pronounced as immigration policy moves closer to citizenship. The administration's expansion of presidential authority has therefore been accompanied by an increasingly important judicial counterweight.

The clearest example is birthright citizenship. Whatever latitude presidents enjoy over the admission and removal of foreign nationals, citizenship at birth occupies different constitutional terrain. The Supreme Court underscored that distinction in June 2026 when it rejected the administration's first attempt to make citizenship dependent on parental immigration status. When the White House returned with a narrower order in August 2026, a federal judge blocked that measure too. The sequence illustrates the emerging institutional dynamic: executive power may repeatedly test the boundaries of immigration authority, but narrowing a policy does not necessarily overcome constitutional limits.

Other immigration measures have faced similar challenges. In January 2026, for example, the State Department paused immigrant visa issuance for nationals of 75 countries while reviewing public-charge screening. A federal district court later ruled that the categorical nationality-based policy exceeded the Secretary of State's statutory authority. The Department subsequently confirmed that the pause was no longer in effect.

These disputes show why the current period is better understood as a contest over institutional boundaries than as the straightforward expansion of unchecked presidential power.

The administration has repeatedly adopted broad interpretations of existing immigration and national-security authorities. Courts have then been asked to decide whether those interpretations remain within statutory or constitutional limits. In some instances, policies have been blocked; in others, they have survived or returned in narrower form.

This pattern is likely to continue. Immigration is particularly suited to this kind of institutional conflict because presidents possess considerable authority in the field, while important limits remain embedded in statutes, constitutional protections and judicial precedent.

A More Conditional Immigration System

One consequence of this approach is greater uncertainty for people who have entered the United States through legal channels.

Immigration systems depend partly on predictability. Students choose universities, companies recruit foreign employees, investors commit capital, and families make long-term decisions on the assumption that lawful pathways will operate according to reasonably stable rules.

Continuous vetting does not remove that predictability altogether, and states have a legitimate interest in reconsidering a visa when credible security or criminal information emerges. The policy question concerns how far the principle should extend and what standards should govern reassessment.

When immigration rules change frequently through executive and administrative action, formal legal status may become less secure even without major legislative change.

There may also be wider economic consequences. Brookings has pointed to a sharp decline in new international student enrolment during 2025 and warned that restrictions affecting students, H-1B workers and employment-based migration could weaken an important source of talent for U.S. universities and innovation-intensive industries.

This creates a familiar but increasingly difficult policy trade-off. The United States has strong reasons to screen foreign nationals carefully, prevent immigration fraud and exclude individuals who present genuine security risks. It also benefits economically and strategically from remaining attractive to international students, researchers, entrepreneurs and skilled workers.

A system built around broad categories and rapidly changing administrative rules may struggle to reconcile those objectives.

The same concern applies more broadly to national-security policy. Measures directed at identifiable threats are easier to defend and administer than policies that place entire nationalities or large categories of migrants under exceptional treatment. Overly broad approaches can produce additional litigation, administrative burdens and uncertainty without necessarily improving the state's ability to identify genuine risks.

What Comes Next?

The issue facing U.S. policymakers is not whether immigration should be regulated or whether security considerations have a legitimate role in visa and border policy. Both are settled features of state authority. The harder question concerns the institutional form regulation should take.

The current reliance on executive action partly reflects Congress's longstanding inability to agree on comprehensive immigration reform. That legislative vacuum has allowed successive presidents to exercise greater influence through administrative tools. Yet policies built predominantly through executive orders are inherently unstable. They can be expanded, challenged or reversed without the durability that accompanies legislation.

Congress therefore has a role beyond debating the overall level of immigration. It also needs to clarify the relationship between immigration law, emergency authority and national-security powers.

Visa policy presents a similar challenge. More intensive screening does not necessarily require broad or opaque enforcement. Clearly defined risk criteria, stronger procedural safeguards and greater transparency around revocation decisions could preserve security objectives while improving predictability.

Citizenship requires an even clearer distinction. Immigration status and citizenship are related, but they are not interchangeable. Litigation over birthright citizenship has shown the problems that arise when tools developed for immigration enforcement are extended into an area governed by explicit constitutional protection.

Maintaining those distinctions matters not only for migrants. It also determines how much authority the executive branch can exercise without new legislation and where the courts are likely to intervene.

Conclusion

The revocation of more than 175,000 visas is one of the most visible signs of a much broader change in U.S. immigration policy.

The Trump administration has tightened entry rules, expanded post-admission screening, placed greater emphasis on national-security considerations and relied heavily on executive authority to alter how the immigration system operates. At the same time, debates once centred on the border have moved into questions of citizenship and political membership.

The change is not absolute. Courts continue to constrain presidential authority, and some of the administration's broadest initiatives have already been blocked or narrowed. Nor are visa holders, permanent residents, naturalised citizens and citizens by birth legally equivalent categories.

What is changing, then, is not simply the restrictiveness of American immigration policy, but the location of the border itself. Screening that once concentrated heavily on admission increasingly follows individuals after entry, while the language of security is being applied to progressively more secure forms of legal membership. The law continues to draw sharp distinctions between visa holders, permanent residents, naturalised citizens and citizens by birth. The political significance of the present moment lies in how vigorously those boundaries are now being tested.

The resulting contest will outlast individual executive orders. At stake is whether the border remains principally a territorial threshold or becomes an enduring administrative condition—and, ultimately, where immigration enforcement ends, and citizenship begins.