

IMMIGRATION

Born in the USA: Trump stokes calls for end to birthright citizenship

There are growing calls in the Republican Party to end birthright citizenship for the children of undocumented migrants. The debate strikes at the very core of American nationhood. Spencer Kimball reports from Chicago.



Born in the United States? Then you're a citizen, regardless of your parents' national origins or legal status. Many Americans view this principle as a cornerstone of their democracy.

Others, like Donald Trump, believe birthright citizenship is a problem. The billionaire real estate tycoon, reality television star and now Republican presidential front-runner would crack down on undocumented migrants by denying citizenship to their children born on US soil.

"They're illegal," Trump said in an interview with NBC's Meet the Press. "Either you have a country or you don't."



Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump

He's not alone. Most Republican presidential candidates back the idea outright or waver when asked to take a position. Only Jeb Bush, whose wife was born in Mexico, and Marco Rubio, the son of Cuban immigrants, have publicly expressed support for the principle of birthright citizenship.

"Within the 14th amendment, there's something called the citizenship clause, and the debate is

centered on exactly who fits the definition of being subject to the jurisdiction of the United States," Jon Feere, a legal policy analyst at the Center for Immigration Studies, told DW.

"All sides of the debate agree, in the least, that children born to foreign diplomats are not to be considered US citizens at birth," Feere said. "The question is whether or not that includes children born to illegal immigrants, children born to tourists, children born to foreign students and so on."

'All persons born or naturalized'

But according to Muzaffar Chishti, there's no question - birthright citizenship is enshrined in the US constitution and applies to virtually everyone.

Passed in the aftermath of the US Civil War, the 14th amendment sought to end racial discrimination by extending citizenship not only to freed African Americans slaves, but to "all persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof."

"It was clear that the framers of the amendment wanted to cover everyone," Chishti, director of the Migration Policy Institute's New York office, told DW.

"More importantly, they wanted to take the authority about citizenship away from Congress," he said. "What they were concerned about was any future Congress would take citizenship away from another disfavored group."

Rare concept globally

This expansive definition of citizenship is rare. Only about 30 countries, mostly in North and South America, grant automatic citizenship to all people born on their territory. The United States and Canada are the only high-income nations who still do so.

"Most countries in the world tend to think of nationhood as something that exists among a certain people who are united by blood and a particular history of experiences," John Skrentny, director of the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at the University of California San Diego, told DW.

"The American myth is that people from diverse backgrounds and diverse bloods come together, out of many one, they share these certain ideas," Skrentny said.

According to Chishti, denying birthright citizenship to the children of undocumented migrants would weaken the very concept of American nationhood.

"The most important feature of the 14th amendment birthright citizenship is that it's an extremely effective integration tool," he said. "We would have a generation, if not generations, of kids who would not have the tools to be assimilated because they would not have the same legal rights."

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