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Military service was once a fast track to U.S. citizenship. The Trump administration keeps narrowing that possibility.

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Last week the Trump administration [announced](#) that it would make it harder for children born to [U.S. servicemembers](#) serving abroad to claim U.S. citizenship. [Many were outraged](#), even as the Trump administration [argued](#) that the policy would affect only servicemembers who are naturalized citizens and deployed before establishing U.S. residency.

But what's more important than this particular change is how the new policy fits a trend. Just as the Trump administration has sought to limit both legal and illegal immigration generally, it has tried to make it harder to gain U.S. citizenship by serving in the military. That's a sharp break from the past.

Military service was once a means to U.S. citizenship

Serving in the military has long been a way to become a U.S. citizen. In 1942, for example, to boost World War II era recruitment, Congress [exempted servicemembers](#) from most naturalization requirements. Even today, U.S. law [exempts](#) those who serve during wartime from residency requirements, and reduces those requirements for those serving in peacetime.

The U.S. military depends on immigrants. The military wants more [servicemembers](#), but [only 13 percent of Americans aged 17-24](#) are both available and eligible for military service without a waiver. And many are not interested. As native-born citizens have become less willing to join the military, the [percentage of immigrants serving](#) has increased. About [65,000 immigrants](#) currently serve in the active duty

military out of 1.29 million, including [many who are not citizens](#) – in no small part as a way to become U.S. citizens.

The Trump administration has made that harder through a series of small changes

But the Trump administration has pursued a range of policies trying to slow that down.

In 2017, the administration directed the Department of Defense to implement [new barriers restricting the ability of immigrants to serve](#) in the military and use that service as a path to citizenship. As a result, servicemembers are filing far fewer [applications for naturalization](#). [What's more, servicemembers are now less likely than civilians to have their applications approved.](#)

Last year, the [AP reported that the military was discharging immigrant recruits](#) who had enlisted under a program called Military Accessions Vital for the National Interest (MAVNI). MAVNI made it easier to recruit [“legal aliens whose skills are considered to be vital to the national interest”](#) by offering them a fast track to citizenship. The Trump administration announced that it would discontinue MAVNI, [despite Pentagon support for it.](#)

Further, earlier this summer the administration announced it would stop blocking deportations for [active-duty troops, their families, and veterans](#). Then came the latest policy in this series, withdrawing automatic citizenship for the children of some servicemembers.

To be sure, the Trump administration is [not the first to deport veterans](#). In January, the [Government Accountability Office revealed](#) that between 2013 and 2018, United States Immigration and Custom Enforcement (ICE) did not offer additional review in veterans' deportation proceedings, as policies required, and that some were [improperly deported](#).

But the Trump administration has intensified efforts to separate military service from citizenship. The Immigrant Legal Resource Center advised in 2018 that [“it may now be faster for \[lawful permanent residents\] seeking citizenship to remain civilians.”](#)

These policy changes hurt military recruitment and effectiveness

Today's military relies on immigrants both for numbers and for access to critical languages and skills. That's why, after the September 11 attacks, President George W. Bush signed a 2002 [Executive Order](#) expediting naturalization for anyone serving in the military from then on, and in 2008 implemented MAVNI.

In 2014, the Obama administration expanded MAVNI to include recipients of [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals \(DACA\)](#). In response, the Pentagon ordered additional screening for MAVNI applicants, [effectively freezing the program](#) that had brought more than 10,000 highly skilled personnel into the military's ranks. The program's architect, Ret. Army Lt. Col. Margaret Stock, says that the Pentagon and the Trump administration have added additional legal hurdles "[because the Pentagon is so xenophobic right now, they view all foreigners as sort of a threat.](#)"

The changes also hurt civil rights efforts for immigrants

Second, historically, military service has been integral to expanding civil rights. British women [used their service](#) in World War I to win voting rights. In the U.S., political scientists [Christopher Parker, Ronald Krebs, and G.L.A. and Evelyn Harris](#) have shown that various marginalized communities have done likewise. In particular, [Parker](#) finds that African American veterans returning from World War II drew on the rhetorical weight of their military service to demand civil rights at home.

Krebs shows that opponents of civil rights have long recognized the power of this argument. For example, a Civil War era Congressman from Ohio [argued against expanding black participation in the Union army](#), saying, "If you make [the black man] the instrument by which your battles are fought, the means by which your victories are won, you must treat him as a victor is entitled to be treated, with all decent and becoming respect."

Thus, even if individual policy changes may affect a few servicemembers, the cumulative effect may be significant. Evidence suggests that it may reduce the military's ability to accomplish its own goals — while also

limiting a way that immigrants can claim a more permanent place in American society.