

ANALYSIS

Trump Administration Will Collect Social Media Handles from Legal Immigrants and U.S. Citizens

The new requirement poses serious threats to free speech and privacy rights.



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Government Power

In a blow to the First Amendment and privacy, the Trump administration last week [approved](#) [\[link-1\]](#) a U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) [plan](#) [\[link-2\]](#) to collect social media handles from people applying to change their immigration status. The new requirement, which was approved for one year, comes after the administration has openly

declared its intent to use social media handles to screen people for speech it dislikes.

The more than 3 million people applying each year for immigration status changes — such as seeking work or travel authorization, a green card, or citizenship — will now be required to give the government their social media handles. In some cases, they must

also provide the handles of their young children, spouses, and parents, many of whom are U.S. citizens, green card holders, or are otherwise in the United States legally. The new rules will require them to submit any social media handles they have used over the past five years, whether used in a personal or professional capacity or even on behalf of an organization. This covers platforms including Facebook, X, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube as well as messaging services such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and GroupMe.

The Trump administration has [already](#) [\[link-3\]](#) arrested and tried to deport people for their First Amendment–protected political speech. As the Brennan Center and the Knight First Amendment Institute explained in [comments](#) [\[link-4\]](#) opposing the USCIS proposal, this new bid for broadscale data collection further undermines constitutional rights to

free speech, association, anonymity, and privacy. The long-term [retention and sharing](#) [\[link-5\]](#) of these handles also violates federal privacy law and enables the continuous surveillance of millions of people in the United States — all with little to no [oversight](#) [\[link-6\]](#) to protect privacy and civil liberties.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) first proposed collecting social media handles on behalf of USCIS and Customs and Border Protection during the first Trump administration. The Brennan Center and 41 other organizations submitted comments to the government [opposing](#) [\[link-7\]](#) its plan, which was eventually rejected by the Biden administration in 2021.

At that time, the Office of Management and Budget [concluded](#) [\[link-8\]](#) that DHS had not demonstrated that the utility of collecting social media handles on immigration forms outweighed the

“monetary and social” costs. Little has changed since then, as the government has failed to produce any evidence supporting USCIS’s claim that the collection of social media handles to conduct social media monitoring facilitates better “vetting and national security screening” of immigrants.

According to [documents](#) [link-9] obtained by the Knight First Amendment Institute through the Freedom of Information Act, government officials [acknowledged](#) [link-10] in a 2021 review that the social media disclosure requirement on visa applications added “no value” and had “very little impact on improving the screening accuracy of relevant systems.” That admission echoed a 2016 DHS transition [brief](#) [link-11] prepared for the incoming Trump administration reporting that in three of the four programs it used to screen refugees, information

from social media “did not yield clear, articulable links to national security concerns.” Officials also noted that such screening was a poor use of resources.

In addition to the lack of benefits, social media surveillance comes with significant social costs. The government’s monitoring of social media [discourages](#) [link-12] people from freely speaking and associating online for fear that the administration may retaliate against those who express views it doesn’t like.

In reviving the proposal this year, USCIS said that gathering social media handles is necessary to comply with the administration’s new [policy](#) [link-13] of screening people in the United States for “hostile attitudes” or “hateful ideology” toward Americans or U.S. culture and institutions. These are vague phrases that have been used

to [label](#) [\[link-14\]](#) and [punish](#) [\[link-15\]](#) constitutionally protected speech.

In addition, USCIS

[announced](#) [\[link-16\]](#) in April that it would begin screening non-U.S. citizens' social media for "antisemitic activity" and "[anti-Americanism](#) [\[link-17\]](#)." It provided no concrete definitions of these terms, [enabling](#) [\[link-18\]](#) broad and indiscriminate targeting of protected speech. The agency later [directed](#) [\[link-19\]](#) immigration officers to consider these views "an overwhelmingly negative factor" in discretionary reviews of immigration requests. The State Department has followed suit, [directing](#) [\[link-20\]](#) consular officers to review visa applicants' online presence for "anti-American" and "antisemitic" activities.

These directives have created a climate of fear in which people applying for work or travel

authorization, green cards, or other changes in immigration status will censor their online expression, knowing that the collection of their social media handles may trigger adverse immigration determinations. Lawsuits recently filed by [union members](#) [\[link-21\]](#), students, and [academics](#) [\[link-22\]](#) highlight the thousands of noncitizens and citizens whose speech is chilled by the threat of adverse immigration actions.

The collection of social media handles also undermines individual privacy. Social media data can reveal [intimate personal details](#) [\[link-23\]](#), such as political views, religious practices, sexual orientation, and embarrassing — but legal — activities. That information is much more detailed and sensitive than what is required to adjudicate applications for changes of immigration status. Because USCIS officials enjoy

broad discretion, using such information increases the risks of bias in the decision-making process and of the misappropriation of the data for other purposes.

Set against the backdrop of the administration's declarations that it

is retaliating against people for their political speech, the expansive new requirement approved last week is a serious threat to constitutional rights.

MORE ON

Social Media [\[link-24\]](#)

Links

link-1: approved https://www.reginfo.gov/public/do/PRAViewICR?ref_nbr=202511-1615-008

link-2: plan <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/09/16/2025-17816/agency-information-collection-activities-new-collection-generic-clearance-for-the-collection-of>

link-3: already <https://knightcolumbia.org/documents/ahmr9jfap2>

link-4: comments <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/brennan-center-and-knight-institute-submit-comments-opposing-dhs-proposal>

link-5: retention and sharing <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/governments-growing-trove-social-media-data>

link-6: oversight <https://www.epi.org/policywatch/trump-administration-closes-three-dhs-offices-focused-on-civil-rights-and-oversight/>

link-7: opposing <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/brennan-center-urges-rejection-proposal-collect-social-media-data>

link-8: concluded https://www.reginfo.gov/public/do/PRAViewICR?ref_nbr=202007-1601-001

link-9: documents <https://int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/kfai-foia-odni-nctc-social-media-identifier-vetting/5c04c4c7006140f8/full.pdf?inline=1>

link-10: acknowledged <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/05/us/social-media-screening-visa-terrorism.html>

link-11: brief <https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/USCIS%20Presidential%20Transition%20Records.pdf?inline=1>

link-12: discourages <https://www.eff.org/document/uaw-v-dos-complaint>

link-13: policy <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/01/30/2025-02009/protecting-the-united-states-from-foreign-terrorists-and-other-national-security-and-public-safety>

link-14: label <https://apnews.com/article/trump-smithsonian-executive-order-improper-ideology-558ebfab722f603e94e02a1a4b06ed4d>

link-15: punish <https://www.harvard.edu/research-funding/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2025/04/Letter-Sent-to-Harvard-2025-04-11.pdf?inline=1>

link-16: announced <https://www.uscis.gov/newsroom/news-releases/dhs-to-begin-screening-aliens-social-media-activity-for-antisemitism>

link-17: anti-Americanism <https://www.uscis.gov/newsroom/news-releases/first-100-days-uscis-delivering-on-making-america-safe-again>

link-18: enabling <https://www.justsecurity.org/114607/how-dhss-new-social-media-vetting-policies-threaten-free-speech/>

link-19: directed <https://perma.cc/A87H-3HL8>

link-20: directing <https://aboutblaw.com/biDF>

link-21: union members <https://www.eff.org/press/releases/labor-unions-eff-sue-trump-administration-stop-surveillance-free-speech-online>

link-22: academics <https://knightcolumbia.org/documents/ahmr9jfap2>

link-23: intimate personal details <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2020/06/eff-court-social-media-users-have-privacy-and-free-speech-interests-their-public>

link-24: Social Media <https://www.brennancenter.org/topics/government-power/social-media>