Immigration in the United States

From 1820 to 1930, the United States received about 60% of the world’s immigrants. Population expansion in developed areas of the world, improved methods of transportation, and U.S. desire to populate available space were all factors in this phenomenon. Through the 19th cent., the United States was in the midst of agricultural, then industrial, expansion. The desire for cheap, unskilled labor and the profits to be made importing immigrants fueled the movement. Immigrants were largely responsible for the rapid development of the country, and their high birthrates did much to swell the U.S. population. Often, however, immigrants formed distinct ethnic neighborhoods, tending to remain somewhat isolated from the wider culture. Frequently exploited, some immigrants were accused by organized labor of lowering wages and living standards, though other groups of immigrants rapidly became mainstays of the labor movement. Opposition was early manifested by such organizations as the Know-Nothing movement and in violent anti-Chinese riots on the West Coast.

Restrictions placed on immigration were often based on race or nationality. There were also restrictions against the entrance of diseased persons, paupers, and other undesirables, and laws were passed for the deportation of aliens. The first permanent quota law was passed in 1924; it also provided for a national origins plan to be put into effect in 1929. In 1952, the Immigration and Nationality Act (the McCarran-Walter Act) was passed; while abolishing race as an overall barrier to immigration, it kept particular forms of national bias. The act was amended in 1965, abolishing the national origins quota. Despite overall limits, immigration to the United States has burgeoned since 1965, and the 1980s saw the highest level of new immigrants since the first decade of the 20th cent.

In 1986, Congress passed legislation that sought to limit the numbers of undocumented or illegal aliens living in America, imposing stiff fines on employers who hired them and giving legal status to a number of aliens who had already lived in the United States for some time. The Immigration Act of 1990 raised the total quota for immigrants and reorganized the preference system for entrance. The 1996 Illegal Immigration and Reform Responsibility Act led to massive deportations of illegal immigrants. Its provisions were later softened under political and legal attack, but a stricter approach to immigrants in general was adopted by the government following the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks.

A number of states have also enacted legislation designed to combat illegal immigration. The state laws appear not to have led to any significant convictions, but in some cases they have increased tensions with the local Hispanic minority and led to a migration of Hispanics, whether illegal immigrants or not, from the state. A 2012 Supreme Court decision concerning Arizona’s law largely reserved to the federal government the right to enact and enforce immigration law while permitting state law enforcement officers to review a person’s immigration status.

Immigration in Other Countries

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Canada, in the first third of the 20th cent., began to receive an increasing number of immigrants, attracted by the expansion of agriculture in the west and the development of industry in the east. Australia and New Zealand received many European immigrants in the 19th cent.; the former country has been characterized by a preference for immigrants of British stock and by a policy of excluding Africans and Asians that dated from the late 19th cent. After 1965, however, this policy began to change; by the 1970s Australia had abandoned the system of racial preferences, and Asian immigration rapidly increased. Two major trends in immigration emerged after World War II: Australia and New Zealand became the countries with the highest rates of increase, and large numbers of Europeans immigrated to Africa. In recent decades, immigration to Europe from Asia and Africa has also substantially increased, as has emigration from Eastern Europe to the newly reunified Germany.

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Immigration policy refers to the established guidelines, rules, and laws regulating the migration to, and establishment of residence within, a specific nation. Throughout its history, the United States has implemented various policies pertaining to immigration that have reflected the social, political, and economic contexts of the times in which specific policies were enacted. Immigration policy remains one of the primary issues of concern among U.S. policymakers and the general public to this day.

General Policy
For the first one hundred years after independence, the United States had a relatively open and unrestricted immigration policy. Virtually anyone wishing to enter the country could do so. The Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 granted the federal government the authority to deport foreigners deemed a threat to national security in times of war and peace, but it did not otherwise impose any limitations on immigration. However, in 1790, Congress did restrict the right to naturalize to “free white persons.” During the middle of the nineteenth century, in the two decades before the Civil War, anti-immigrant and nativist sentiments soared among American citizens in the north. This hostility targeted Irish Catholics fleeing the devastating Potato Famine, who then constituted the bulk of immigrants and whose religious practices and alleged inability to acculturate to American society sparked anti-immigrant feelings among Anglo-Protestants. The resulting Native American party, or the “Know-Nothings,” was disbanded by the Civil War, and the U.S. government took no legislative action to curb immigration. In the aftermath of the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, Congress extended the right to U.S. citizenship through naturalization to black immigrants, although it continued to deny this right to Asians and Native Americans.

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The first major U.S. law restricting immigration came in 1882 with the Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred almost all persons from China from entering the United States. Although Chinese immigrants had been recruited as workers by employers in the western United States since the 1850s, their growing numbers along the West Coast alarmed many Anglo Americans, who regarded the Chinese as an “alien race” who threatened to displace U.S. workers. Following the Chinese Exclusion Act, formal and informal policies that attempted to restrict or prohibit the entry of specific nationalities gained strong support among various policymakers. For example, under the Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt convinced the Japanese government not to issue further passports to Japanese workers in exchange for the improved treatment of Japanese immigrants already in the United States.

Immigration restrictions culminated during the 1920s in the aftermath of World War I. Anti-immigrant policymakers enacted a series of restrictions that barred immigration from eastern Asia and the Pacific Rim in 1917, and, in 1921 and 1924, implemented strict quota limitations on European immigrants. These quotas aimed to preserve the “Anglo-Saxons,” or Americans of northern and western European descent, as the numerical majority in American society. The Immigration Act of 1924 reaffirmed the exclusion of Asians from immigrating to the United States by forbidding the entry of immigrants who were ineligible for U.S. citizenship via naturalization. Anti-Asian discriminatory barriers to naturalization did not fully end until 1952.

Immigration from the Western Hemisphere

No quotas were established for independent nations in the western hemisphere, however. This resulted in a larger volume of immigration from Canada and Mexico, and in the southwest, Mexicans quickly replaced Chinese and Japanese immigrants as the primary source of immigrant labor. In 1924 the U.S. government created the Border Patrol to monitor unauthorized entries along the Mexican and Canadian borders, but in its earliest days the patrol seemed to focus more intently on preventing Chinese, rather than Mexicans, from illegally entering the United States. During the Great Depression, however, the Border Patrol and the U.S. government stepped up deportation and repatriation efforts against Mexicans, although the Bracero program brought over five million Mexican guest workers into the United States between 1942 and 1964 to alleviate labor shortages stemming from wartime mobilizations. Ironically the largest mass deportation campaign in U.S. history, Operation Wetback, occurred during the 1950s amidst the Bracero program, and through a series of sweeps across the southwest, the operation led to the deportations and voluntary departures of over three million Mexicans and Mexican Americans.

Keywords

Mexico

Immigration and U.S. Latinos

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The Immigration Act of 1924 was intended to preserve the western European Protestant composition of the U.S. population by sharply restricting immigration from Asia and eastern Europe. The absence of a quota on the western hemisphere, however, meant a steady rise of Latin Americans, particularly Mexicans, legally entering the United States. In this 1938 photo a woman takes close care of her documents as she passes through an immigration station in El Paso, Texas.

source: Lange, Dorothea, photographer, Library of Congress

The year after the Bracero program ended, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the landmark Hart-Cellar Act into law. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 eliminated the national origins quotas that had been implemented during the 1920s and in its place established a general numerical limit for all immigration. Provisions granting preference to immigrants with skills needed by U.S. employers and immigrants attempting to reunite with immediate family members already living in the United States, which had been codified in the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act, remained in effect. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 dramatically transformed both U.S. immigration and the ethnic composition of American society by significantly increasing immigration from Asia and the Caribbean.

In March 1980 President Jimmy Carter signed the Refugee Act into law. The act defined a refugee as a person who had been compelled to leave his or her homeland under fears of persecution due to racial or ethnic heritage, religious affiliation, or political ideology. In addition the act provided federal money for refugee resettlement. The Refugee Act of 1980 facilitated the influx of large numbers of refugees from war-torn areas of southeast Asia, such as Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, into the United States. However Haitians fleeing the U.S.-backed Duvalier regime were denied refugee status or political asylum. Shortly after passage of the 1980 law, large numbers of Cuban refugees entered southern Florida as part of the Mariel Boatlift. Fidel Castro Ruz instigated the Mariel Boatlift by opening Cuban seaports and permitting any Cubans who wished to leave the communist island for the United States to do so. Approximately 125,000 Cuban refugees settled in the United States during the spring and summer of 1980, which inspired the approval of an English-only language referendum in Miami later that year to halt the perceived “Cubanization” of the city.

Since the mid-1980s, the most contentious aspect of U.S. immigration policy has been illegal immigration. Following several years of debate, Congress enacted the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in November 1986, which made it illegal for employers to hire undocumented workers and requires employers to check the identification of employees. IRCA’s supporters were confident that
when illegal immigrants learned they would not be able to work in the United States, they would return to their country of origin or not enter the United States to begin with. However IRCA failed to solve illegal immigration which continued unabated during the 1990s and early 2000s. Illegal immigration has become a passionate issue across the country as illegal immigrants have settled in the interior United States in recent decades. Increased numbers of Border Patrol agents and enforcement strategies such as Operation Hold the Line in El Paso and Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego have only had limited success, forcing undocumented immigrants to enter the United States from other areas, such as Arizona and New Mexico.

In response to the federal government’s inability to effectively control unauthorized immigration, various state and local governments have attempted to implement their own policies over the past two decades. For example, despite large Latino protests and condemnation from Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León, California voters approved Proposition 187 in 1994, which barred illegal immigrants from receiving public education and nonemergency medical care and also required social service workers to report suspected undocumented immigrants to authorities. Proposition 187 never went into effect, however, having been struck down in federal court in 1999. Voters in Arizona approved a measure similar to Proposition 187 in 2004. Recently the small Pennsylvania town of Hazelton implemented an ordinance requiring landlords to verify the citizenship or immigration status of tenants by requesting identification. The Hazelton ordinance attempts to discourage illegal immigrants from trying to take up residence within the town.

On December 16, 2005, the Republican-controlled U.S. House of Representatives approved H.R. 4437, a bill sponsored by Republican Congressman James Sensenbrenner of Wisconsin. Among other things, H.R. 4437 would have erected a seven-hundred-mile fence along the U.S.-Mexican border and increased illegal residence in the United States from a civil infraction to a felony. The bill fueled massive nationwide protests among undocumented immigrants and their supporters during the spring of 2006, and the U.S. Senate failed to approve the bill. A different bill, sponsored by Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona and Democratic Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts in 2006, called for increased border security and employment-based enforcement while granting undocumented immigrants a conditional pathway to legalization. However, the McCain-Kennedy bill failed to win approval, and illegal immigration remains an unresolved issue to this day.

Despite Presidents George W. Bush and Barack H. Obama's support for comprehensive immigration reform legislation that bolsters immigration enforcement while also providing a path to legalization for undocumented aliens, Congress has not passed such legislation. Opponents of comprehensive immigration reform, primarily conservative Republicans, criticize any legalization program as “amnesty” and instead prefer legislation that focuses solely on enforcement. Congress has also consistently failed to approve the proposed DREAM Act, which would grant legal residency to undocumented minors provided they earn a four-year college degree or serve six years in the U.S. military.

See also Bracero Program; Immigration Act, 1924 (United States); Immigration Act, 1990 (United States); Immigration and Nationality Acts, 1952 and 1965 (United States); Immigration and Naturalization Service, United States; Immigration Reform and Control Act, 1986 (IRCA) (United States); Latinos and U.S. Policy; Mariel Boatlift, 1980; Proposition 187, California

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