

Surges and slips: Immigration in America over 200 years

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — Immigration to the United States has come in swells and dips over more than two centuries. This has been driven by shifts in U.S. policy, the mood in the country and world events.

There are many factors that impact immigration policy. These include **labor shortages**, racial tension, economic forces, religious prejudice and **national security concerns**.

Alan Kraut is a historian at the American University. He says that the United States is pulled between being generous and seeking its own interests. "Here we are, the United States, a nation of nations, with the **iconic** symbol of the Statue of Liberty, and yet we are still arguing about the peopling of America," Kraut says.

In the modern era, the percentage of the population born outside of the United States hit a low at 4.7 percent in 1970. It's now near historic highs, hitting 13.5 percent in 2015.

Immigration Laws Shape Diversity of Nation

At times welcoming, at times restrictive, immigration laws have helped shape the diversity of the nation.

President Donald Trump is making moves to build a border wall. He is also considering restricting **refugees** from coming to the United States. This means now is a good time to look at the waves of immigration that have helped shape the nation's identity:

D'Vera Cohn works for the Pew Research Center. According to her research, the United States has been **regulating** immigration since not long after it won independence from Britain.

A 1790 law limited citizenship to "free white persons" of "good moral character" who had lived in the United States for at least two years. A series of laws in 1798 tacked on some strict requirements. For example, noncitizens were required to live in the United States for 14 years before becoming citizens. Some portions of the law were repealed in 1802 and others expired.

Overall, though, for its first 100 years, "the United States facilitated immigration, welcoming foreigners to a **vast** country," wrote Philip Martin. Martin is a retired professor from the University of California, Davis.

Slaves Gain Citizenship Rights

For many of those years, it brought in slaves, too, treating them as property, not citizens. In 1870, people of African origin gained citizenship rights.

The years from 1820 to 1870 saw an influx of newcomers from Northern and Western Europe, mostly German and Irish. These immigrants provided needed **labor**. About a third came from Ireland, where a **famine** was taking place. Many of the Irish immigrants were Catholic and some showed the newcomers they were unwelcome by **targeting** their religion.

The gold rush and jobs on the transcontinental railroad also attracted Chinese immigrants, generating **economic and racial resentments**.

Starting in 1875, the United States began **imposing** restrictions on the types of immigrants it would allow. Among those banned were "criminals, people with contagious diseases, polygamists, anarchists, beggars and importers of prostitutes," according to Cohn. A series of laws also put growing restrictions on immigrants from China, and even provided for the **deportation** of Chinese nationals already in the United States.

Later laws **barred** immigration from most Asian countries.

America Beckons But Americans Repel

Kraut says the push-pull between the need for more laborers and the tensions that immigration stirred led to a common expression: "America beckons, but Americans repel."

Between 1881 and 1920, more than 23 million people came to the United States, mostly from Southern and Eastern Europe, aided by cheaper trans-Atlantic travel and attracted by employers seeking workers.

It was a period of industrialization and easier travel around the globe. As a result, "there were more people on the move than at any other time in human history," says Kraut.

Then came the Great Depression and more restrictive laws, sending U.S. immigration into a long, steady decline. Laws enacted in 1921 and 1924 for the first time set quotas. These were limits for how many people could come from each nation.

In 1920, immigrants made up 13.2 percent of the population. In 1970, the number bottomed out at 4.7 percent.

In 1965, immigration policy underwent a dramatic shift from a quota-based system to one that favored the entry of people who already had relatives in the United States or had skills needed by employers. Since the Immigration and Nationality Act was passed, immigration has been dominated by people from Asia and Latin America rather than people from Europe, according to Cohn.

Once the 1965 law kicked in, immigration started growing. The immigrant population reached 43.3 million people in 2015.

Where were all those immigrants from? Fifty-three percent were from the Americas, 30.6 percent were from Asia, 11.1 percent were from Europe and 4.8 percent were from Africa, according to the Migration Policy Institute.

Worries About Terrorism

The 1965 law is still the foundation of the U.S. immigration system. But there were notable changes made in 1986 and 1996 to deal with rising concerns about immigration without permission. The first change legalized about 2.7 million immigrants living in the United States without permission (most of them from Mexico and Central America) and tried to crack down on the hiring of people in the country illegally, with poor results. The second expanded reasons for deporting people or ruling them ineligible to come to the United States, and gave state and local police power to enforce immigration laws.

The years since the 9/11 attacks of 2001 have brought laws that allow immigrants to be turned away or deported because they are suspected of terrorism.

And now, President Donald Trump's focus on building a wall at the U.S.-Mexican border and his consideration of a plan to suspend the U.S. program for admitting refugees show there is still plenty of tension at the intersection of illegal immigration and national security.

Definitions

Citizen: A person who legally belongs to a country and has all of the rights and protections of that country

Deportation: The removal from a country of someone who does not have permission to live there

Undocumented immigrant: A person who came from another country without permission and doesn't have the papers (documents) needed to stay in the country legally