

RE: United States (major) Immigration Law Timeline

We are, of course, a nation of immigrants, a destination for people from around the world. And the vast majority of us - everyone, in fact, except for folx indigenous to what we now call the United States of America - can trace roots to foreign lands.

Below are some major laws that have shaped the history of immigration in the United States since its birth. This is not an exhaustive list but rather a selection of key legislation that has influenced immigration policy over time. Starting with the 1790 Naturalization Act, which set the first rules for national citizenship and restricted naturalized citizenship to “free white persons” or white, male, property owners.

1790

Naturalization Act of 1790

This was the first law to define eligibility for citizenship by naturalization and establish standards and procedures by which immigrants became US citizens. Congress limited this important right to “free white persons” which means it excluded non-white people from eligibility to naturalize. Naturalization requirements included two years of residence in the country and “good moral character”.

1798

Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798

A Federalist-controlled Congress passed four laws, known collectively as the Alien and Sedition Acts. Congress enacted deportation laws targeting persons deemed political threats to the United States in response to conflicts in Europe. Federalists argued that these measures were necessary for national security.

1803

Ban on “importation” of “any negro, mulatto, or other person of colour” (1803) (effective 1808)

The Haitian revolution led Congress to ban immigration by free blacks to contain anti-slavery campaigners.

1830

Indian Removal Act (1830)

The law that led to the Trail of Tears. During the presidency of Andrew Jackson, this law authorized the confiscation of land from Native Americans and provided resources for their forced removal west of the Mississippi River. Native Americans were forced to leave their homelands and walk hundreds of miles to a specially designated “Indian Territory” west of the Mississippi River.

1848

Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848)

In the settlement of the Mexican American War, this treaty formalized the United States' annexation of a major portion of northern Mexico, El Norte, and conferred citizenship on Mexicans choosing to remain in the territory.

1849

Passenger Cases

The Supreme Court designates the authority to legislate and to enforce immigration restrictions a matter of federal authority rather than a state or local power.

1854

People v. Hall (1854)

This California Supreme Court case ruled that the testimony of a Chinese man who witnessed a murder by a white man was inadmissible, denying Chinese alongside Native and African Americans the status to testify in courts against whites.

1857

Dred Scott v. Sanford (1857)

This Supreme Court ruling established that slaves and free African Americans were not citizens of the U.S. and were not entitled to the rights and privileges of citizenship, such as the right to sue in federal courts.

1862

Act to prohibit the "coolie trade" (1862)

During the Civil War, the Republican-controlled Congress sought to prevent southern plantation owners from replacing their enslaved African American workers with unfree contract or "coolie" laborers from China.

1863

Emancipation Proclamation

President Abraham Lincoln's 1863 executive order freeing the slaves held in the Confederate states.

1864

Immigration Act of 1864

This law legalized labor recruitment practices similar to indentured servitude in an attempt to encourage immigration to the United States, but it was quickly repealed.

1868

Burlingame Treaty of 1868

Negotiated during construction of the Transcontinental Railroad which relied heavily on Chinese labor, this international agreement secured US access to Chinese workers by guaranteeing rights of free migration to both Chinese and Americans.

14th Amendment

Ratified in 1868 to secure equal treatment for African Americans after the Civil War, the Fourteenth Amendment guaranteed birthright citizenship for all persons born in the United States. It also provided for equal protections and due process for all legal residents.

1870

Naturalization Act of 1870

The Naturalization Act of 1870 explicitly extended naturalization rights already enjoyed by white immigrants to “aliens of African nativity and to persons of African descent,” thus denying access to the rights and protections of citizenship to other nonwhite immigrant groups.

1872

Chinese Educational Mission 1872-1881

This program sent about 120 Chinese students to study in New England and is often cited as a pioneering effort in mutually beneficial systems of international education which promoted the sharing of knowledge and understanding and improved international relations.

1875

Following the Civil War, some states passed their own immigration laws. In 1875 the Supreme Court declares that it’s the responsibility of the federal government to make and enforce immigration laws.

Page Law (1875)

This law prohibited the recruitment to the United States of unfree laborers and women for “immoral purposes” but was enforced primarily against Chinese.

Chy Lung v. Freeman (1875)

This Supreme Court decision affirmed that the federal government holds sole authority to regulate immigration.

1880

Angell Treaty of 1880

This treaty updated the 1868 Burlingame Treaty with China, allowing the United States to restrict the migration of certain categories of Chinese workers. It moved U.S. immigration policy closer to outright Chinese exclusion.

1882

Chinese Exclusion Act aka “An Act to execute certain treaty stipulations relating to Chinese”

This law was a major shift in U.S. immigration policy toward growing restrictiveness. The law targeted Chinese immigrants for restriction-- the first such group identified by race and class for severely limited legal entry and ineligibility for citizenship.

Immigration Act of 1882

Legislated a few months after the Chinese Exclusion Law, this immigration legislation expanded the ranks of excludable aliens to include other undesirable persons and attributes such as "convicts," "lunatics," and "those likely to become a public charge."

1884

Elk v. Wilkins (1884)

The Supreme Court ruled that the Fourteenth Amendment did not apply to Native Americans who did not automatically gain citizenship by birth and could therefore be denied the right to vote.

1885

Foran Act of 1885 (aka Alien Contract Labor Law)

This law banned the recruitment of workers bound by contracts.

1887

The Dawes Allotment Act

Complaints about the reservation system for Native Americans led Congress to authorize the president to allot – or separate into individual landholdings – tribal reservation lands. Native Americans receiving allotments could gain U.S. citizenship, but often lost their land.

1888

Scott Act of 1888

Congress extended domestic authority over immigration to improve enforcement of the Chinese exclusion laws. It abolished one of the exempt statuses, returning laborers, stranding about 20,000 Chinese holding Certificates of Return outside the United States.

1889

Chae Chan Ping v. United States (1889) (aka the Chinese Exclusion Case)

This Supreme Court decision affirmed the plenary powers of U.S. federal authorities over immigration matters, in this instance even when changes in U.S. immigration law reversed earlier policy and practice.

1891

Immigration Act of 1891

The Immigration Act of 1891 further excludes who can enter the United States, barring the immigration of polygamists, people convicted of certain crimes, and the sick or diseased. The Act also created a federal office of immigration to coordinate immigration enforcement and a corps of immigration inspectors stationed at principle ports of entry.

Immigration Bureau established (1891)

Congress quickly came to realize the challenges of enforcing immigration exclusions, leading it to authorize and fund a dedicated immigration bureau responsible both for processing legal immigrants and enforcing immigration restrictions.

1892

Geary Act (1892)

Congress renewed the Chinese exclusion laws and expanded enforcement mechanisms by requiring that Chinese prove their lawful presence in the United States by carrying a Certificate of Residence, a precursor of the green card system, or be liable for detention and deportation.

Fong Yue Ting v. United States (1892)

This Supreme Court decision ruled as constitutional the 1892 Geary Act's requirement that Chinese residents, and only Chinese residents, carry Certificates of Residence to prove their legal entry to the United States, or be subject to detention and deportation.

1894

Immigration Restriction League

Increasing immigration, mainly from southern and eastern European countries, along with a series of economic downturns fueled nativist fears and the founding of the Immigration Restriction League by three influential Harvard graduates.

1896

Wong Wing v. United States (1896)

This Supreme Court decision that detention by immigration authorities does not constitute a criminal punishment, affirming the lesser rights of excludable aliens

Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)

This Supreme Court case validated racial segregation by ruling that the equal protections principles mandated by the Fourteenth Amendment could be honored with facilities that were "separate but equal."

1898

United States v. Wong Kim Ark (1898)

This Supreme Court case established the precedent that any person born in the United States is a citizen by birth regardless of race or parents' status.

1903

Immigration Act of 1903

This law identified anarchists as targets for exclusion and made provision for their removal if detained after entry.

1904

Extension of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1904)

Congress extended the Chinese exclusion laws in perpetuity in response to the Chinese government's efforts to leverage better conditions for Chinese travelers to the United States by abrogating earlier treaties. Chinese communities organized an anti-American boycott in protest.

1905

Anti-American Boycott (1905)

An international coalition of Chinese merchants and students coordinated boycotts of U.S. goods and services in China and some cities in Southeast Asia to protest the Chinese Exclusion laws.

1907

Expatriation Act of 1907

Under the principle that women assumed the citizenship of their husbands, this act stripped citizenship from U.S.-born women when they married noncitizen immigrant men.

Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907-1908

Rather than enacting racially discriminatory and offensive immigration laws, President Theodore Roosevelt sought to avoid offending the rising world power of Japan through this negotiated agreement by which the Japanese government limited the immigration of its own citizens.

1911

Dillingham Commission Reports (1911)

Congress funded this high-level commission to research the causes and impact of recent immigration to build support for significant restrictions on European immigration. The commission produced a 41-volume study in 1911.

1913

Alien Land Laws in California (1913 & 1920)

California, along with many other western states, enacted laws that banned "aliens ineligible for citizenship" from owning or leasing land. The Supreme Court upheld these laws as constitutional.

1917

Immigration Act of 1917 (Barred Zone Act)

Xenophobia reaches new highs on the eve of American involvement in World War I. The Immigration Act of 1917 establishes a literacy requirement for immigrants entering the country and halts immigration from most Asian countries extending from the Middle East to Southeast Asia.

Jones-Shafroth Act (1917)

This act enacted U.S. citizenship for Puerto Ricans after the United States acquired the island as an incorporated territory in 1898.

1918

Wartime Measure of 1918

This act gave the executive branch greater powers to enforce immigration restrictions during World War I. It particularly targeted anarchists and other potential radicals.

1919

The Palmer Raids (1919-1920)

The U.S. Department of Justice conducted a series of raids to round up, arrest, and deport suspected anarchists and left-wing radicals.

1921

Emergency Quota Law (1921)

Fears of increased immigration after the end of World War I and the spread of radicalism propelled Congress to enact this "emergency" measure imposing drastic quantitative caps on immigration.

1922

Cable Act of 1922

After women gained suffrage with the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, Congress swiftly enacted this law to restore citizenship to U.S.-born women who had married noncitizen husbands and thereby lost their citizenship under the Expatriation Act of 1907.

Ozawa v. United States (1922)

The hardening of U.S. isolationism set the stage for the Supreme Court to affirm the 1790 Nationality Act's stipulation that Asians are ineligible for naturalization because they are racially not "white" regardless of their demonstrated acculturation and integration.

1923

Thind v. United States (1923)

Contradicting the logic behind its ruling in *Ozawa v. U.S.*, the Supreme Court found that Bhagat Singh Thind was ineligible for citizenship even though as an Asian Indian, he would have been categorized as Aryan or Caucasian, according to the prevailing racial science of the time. Although Thind was racially white, the Supreme Court found that he would not be considered "white" in the eyes of the "common man," despite scientific race categories, and was therefore also ineligible for citizenship. The Thind decision led to the denaturalization of about fifty Asian Indian Americans who had earlier successfully applied for and received U.S. citizenship.

1924

Indian Citizenship Act of 1924

This law stipulated that all Native Americans born in the United States were automatically citizens by birth. Native Americans were the last main group to gain this right set forth in the Fourteenth Amendment.

Immigration Act of 1924 (Johnson-Reed Act)

To further limit immigration, this law limits the number of immigrants allowed into the United States yearly through nationality quotas. Under the new quota system, the United States issues immigration visas to 2 percent of the total number of people of each nationality in the United States at the 1890 census. The law favors immigration from Northern and Western European countries. Just three countries, Great Britain, Ireland and Germany account for 70 percent of all available visas. Immigration from Southern, Central and Eastern Europe was limited. The Act completely excludes immigrants from Asia, aside from the Philippines, at the time an American colony.

Labor Appropriations Act of 1924

Immigration within the American hemisphere remained uncapped until 1965; however, in 1924 Congress authorized funding for the Border Patrol to regulate crossings occurring between immigration stations.

1929

Mexican Repatriation (1929-1936)

During the economic and political crises of the 1920s and 1930s, the Border Patrol launched several campaigns to detain Mexicans, including some U.S.-born citizens, and expel them across the border.

Undesirable Aliens Act of 1929 (Blease's Law)

Blease's Law criminalized crossing the border outside an official port of entry. Primarily designed to restrict Mexican immigration, the law made "unlawfully entering the country" a misdemeanor and returning after a deportation a felony.

1934

Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934

Completing the racial exclusion of Asians, Congress imposed immigration restrictions on Filipinos by granting the Philippines eventual independence. Previously, Filipinos could immigrate freely as U.S. nationals from a colony of the United States.

1942

Bracero Agreement (1942-1964)

During World War II, the U.S. government negotiated with the Mexican government to recruit Mexican workers, all men and without their families, to work on short-term contracts on farms and in other war industries. After the war, the program continued in agriculture until 1964.

Executive Order 9066 (1942-1945)

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed this war-time executive order authorizing the rounding up and incarceration of Japanese Americans living within 100 miles of the west coast.

1943

Repeal of Chinese Exclusion (1943)

The importance of China as the U.S. government's chief ally in the Pacific war against Japan led Congress to repeal the Chinese Exclusion laws, placing China under the same immigration restrictions as European countries.

1944

Korematsu v. United States (1944)

This Supreme Court decision upheld the federal government's right to set aside civil rights protections in the name of "military necessity" in ruling on Fred Korematsu's challenge to Executive Order 9066, which authorized removal and incarceration of Japanese Americans.

Ex Parte Endo (1944)

In December 1944, the Supreme Court authorized the end of Japanese American incarceration by ruling that "concededly loyal" U.S. citizens could not be held, regardless of the principle of "military necessity."

1945

War Brides Acts (1945 & 1946)

Congress enacted exceptions to the national origins quotas imposed by the Immigration Act of 1924 in order to help World War II soldiers and veterans bring back foreign spouses and fiancés they had met while serving in the military.

1946

Luce-Celler Act of 1946

This law further undermined Asian exclusion by extending naturalization rights and immigration quotas to Filipinos and Indians as wartime allies.

Fulbright-Hays Act of 1946

Senator Fulbright of Arkansas proposed using proceeds from the sale of war surplus materials to fund programs to improve mutual understanding between the U.S. and the rest of the world through personnel exchanges and international education.

1948

Displaced Persons Act (1948)

In contrast lawmakers' widespread indifference before World War II, after the war, under pressure from the White House and Department of State, Congress authorized admissions for refugees from Europe and permitted asylum seekers already in the U.S. to regularize their status.

1951

The 1951 Refugee Convention

This UN Refugee Convention set international standards for refugee rights and resettlement work. It is administered by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees. Wary of international obligations, President Truman refused to sign the U.S. government on to the convention.

1952

Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 (The McCarran-Walter Act)

The [McCarran-Walter Act](#) formally ends the exclusion of Asian immigrants to the United States.

H-2 Guestworker Visa Program

The Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) of 1952 authorized a nonimmigrant visa category, known as H-2, permitting the recruitment of foreign farmworkers to the United States on a temporary basis.

1953

Refugee Relief Act (1953)

Dissatisfaction with the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act inspired support for this legislation which provided 214,000 visas to refugees, primarily from Europe but with 5,000 designated for the Far East.

1954

Operation Wetback (1953-1954)

Even as the bracero program continued to recruit temporary workers from Mexico, the Immigration Bureau led round ups of Mexican nationals. The Bureau claimed to have deported one million Mexicans.

1956

Parole of Hungarians (1956-57), Cubans (1959-62), Chinese (1962)

The parole authority granted the attorney-general in the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act was used three times to aid refugees fleeing communism. To avoid public outcry, each use of parole was accompanied by extensive publicity campaigns to promote acceptance.

Chinese Confession Program (1956-1965)

The Immigration Bureau and the FBI used this program to try regularize the statuses of the many Chinese Americans who had entered the United States using some form of immigration fraud under the discriminatory Chinese exclusion laws.

1961

Act of September 26, 1961

This law added more exceptions to immigration restriction by national quotas by categorizing international adoption as a form of family reunification.

1962

An Act: To facilitate the entry of alien skilled specialists and certain relatives of United States citizens, and for other purposes (1962)

This law opened the door to immigration by highly skilled workers from countries with low immigration quotas, anticipating the Immigration Act of 1965's emphasis on employment preferences.

1965

Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (Hart-Celler Act)

This act overhauls the American immigration system. The Act ends the national origin quotas enacted in the 1920s which favored some racial and ethnic groups over others.

The quota system is replaced with a seven-category preference system emphasizing family reunification and skilled immigrants. Upon signing the new bill, President Lyndon B. Johnson, called the old immigration system “un-American,” and said the new bill would correct a “cruel and enduring wrong in the conduct of the American Nation.” Over the next five years, immigration from war-torn regions of Asia, including Vietnam and Cambodia, would more than quadruple. Family reunification became a driving force in U.S. immigration.

1966

Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966

After Fidel Castro's revolution, anti-communist Cubans received preferential immigration conditions because they came from a historically close U.S. neighbor and ally. This law provided them permanent status and resources to help adjustment to life in the U.S.

1967

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Refugee Protocol

The UNHCR issued this protocol in 1967 to implement the goals of the 1951 Refugee Convention, which set forth the key principle of refoulement, or that persons in flight from persecution and danger cannot be forced to return to places of danger.

1975

Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act (1975)

The United States made provisions to admit about 135,000 Vietnamese and other Southeast Asians in the months following the fall of Saigon, resettle them across the United States with resources to help them establish new lives.

1976

Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1976 and 1978

The 1976 Amendments extended to the Western Hemisphere a per country ceiling of 20,000 and a modified preference system for arrivals. In 1978, the law was further amended to establish a single worldwide annual ceiling of 290,000.

1980

Refugee Act of 1980

While adhering to the UN standard for defining refugees, this law made U.S. refugee policy more responsive to changing situations through the implementation of annual admissions quotas that could be adjusted annually after consultation between Congress and the White House.

Mariel Boatlift of 1980

The Mariel boatlift refers to the mass movement of approximately 125,000 Cuban asylum seekers to the United States from April to October 1980. It prompted the creation of the Cuban-Haitian Entrant Program.

1982

Plyler v. Doe (1982)

This Supreme Court case ruled that public school districts cannot constitutionally refuse admission to unauthorized immigrant children because the harmful effects to the public outweighed the cost savings.

1984

Korematsu v. United States (1984)

The courts vacated the 1944 Supreme Court conviction of Fred Korematsu for violating curfew orders imposed on Japanese Americans after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

1986

Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) (1986)

To address the problem of unauthorized immigration, Congress implemented through bipartisan agreement a multi-pronged system that provided amnesty for established residents, increased border enforcement, enhanced requirements of employers, and expanded guestworker visa programs. President Ronald Reagan signs into law the Simpson-Mazzoli Act also known as the Reagan Amnesty, which grants amnesty to an estimated 3 million individuals - mostly of Hispanic descent - living undocumented in the United States.

1987

HIV Exclusion Ban

The U.S. Public Health Service adds HIV as a “dangerous contagious disease” to its immigration exclusion list and mandates testing for all visa applicants. The HIV ban will not be lifted until January 4, 2010.

1990

Immigration Act of 1990

Congress revised the Immigration Act of 1965 by implementing the H-1B visa program for skilled temporary workers, with some provisions for conversion to permanent status, and the diversity visa lottery for populations unable to enter through the preference system.

1991

American Baptist Churches (ABC) Settlement Agreement

The regular denial of asylum applications from Salvadorans and Guatemalans fleeing violence in their homelands during the 1980s led to this legal challenge which forced changes to U.S. procedures for handling such cases.

1992

Chinese Student Protection Act (1992)

Legislated in response to the brutal Chinese government crackdowns on student protests in Tiananmen in 1989, this law permitted Chinese students living in the United States to gain legal permanent status.

1996

Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) (1996)

Building on the steps taken with IRCA in 1986, IIRIRA further empowered federal authorities to enforce immigration restrictions by adding resources for border policing and for verification of employment credentials.

1997

Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act

The Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA) allowed certain Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Nicaraguans who had fled violence and poverty in their homelands in the 1980s to file for asylum and remain in the United States.

The Flores Settlement

The Flores settlement resulted from the 1993 Supreme Court case *Reno v. Flores*, regarding the treatment of unaccompanied minors in immigration detention. The settlement, currently being challenged, set federal standards for the treatment and release of children in detention.

1998

Haitian Refugee Immigrant Fairness Act

Under the Haitian Refugee Immigration Fairness Act (HRIFA), enacted by Congress on Oct. 21, 1998, certain Haitian nationals who had been residing in the United States could become legal permanent residents.

2001

Zadvydas v. Davis (2001)

This Supreme Court case ruled that immigration authorities cannot indefinitely detain aliens ordered deported, but for whom no destination can be arranged.

2002

Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act (2002)

After the attacks of September 11th, the U.S. government acted to expand the budget, staffing, and powers of the immigration enforcement bureaucracy.

Homeland Security Act (2002)

The Homeland Security Act created the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) by consolidating 22 diverse agencies and bureaus. The creation of DHS reflected mounting anxieties about immigration in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11th.

2006

Secure Fence Act (2006)

Passed in October 2006, this law mandated that the Secretary of Homeland Security act quickly to achieve operational control over U.S. international land and maritime borders including an expansion of existing walls, fences, and surveillance.

2012

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) (2012)

Trying to cope with the long-term residence of millions of unauthorized immigrants, this executive order provided protection from deportation and work authorization to persons who arrived as minor children and had lived in the United States since June 15, 2007.

2014

Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA) and DACA Program expanded

This executive order issued by the Obama White House sought to defer deportation and some other protections for unauthorized immigrants whose children were either American citizens or lawful permanent residents.

2017

Muslim Travel Ban

The "Muslim Ban" refers to a series of the Trump administration's executive orders that prohibited travel and refugee resettlement from select predominately Muslim countries. After several legal challenges, the Supreme Court upheld most provisions of a third version of the ban.

2019

Final Rule on "Public Charge Ground of Inadmissibility"

In 2019, the Trump administration's Department of Homeland Security finalized a rule that expanded the list of received benefits and other factors to be considered in determining whether an applicant for admission or adjustment of status is likely to become a public charge.

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