The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965:
Debate and Diplomacy Over The National Origins Quota

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Historical Paper
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I come from a family of immigrants. My maternal grandfather came to America on a student visa in 1960, so I initially wanted to explore the topic of foreign students. However, this topic was too broad, so as I researched further, I discovered the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. I soon found out how important the Act was in changing the demographics of our country. If not for the Act, I might not have been born. I learned that my extended family (as well as those of many of my friends and classmates) was able to immigrate by using the provisions of the Act. I was drawn in by my family connection and how perfectly it fit the theme, so I chose it as my topic.

As the coronavirus pandemic was still going on, I began researching my paper primarily by using online research databases for historical newspapers such as Proquest through my public library. The archives of The New York Times and The Washington Post were where I found the most useful primary sources. I also watched Professor Cannato’s videos from the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, which gave me a better background on the history of immigration. I also found listening to the speeches and telephone calls from the LBJ Library Digital Archives very insightful. These telephone conversations revealed President Johnson’s persuasive style.

I chose to write a paper for National History Day because I’ve always loved to write. I hadn't written a historical paper before, and I wanted to experience the process. My brother was another reason- he wrote an NHD paper three years ago, and he told me he learned a lot. As I
started researching, I found mostly text-based documents, so choosing to write a paper turned out to be the best for me.

My paper relates to this year’s theme of Debate and Diplomacy in several ways. Since the 1920s, immigration policy had been heavily debated between restrictionists and reformers. The main point of contention was regarding the National Origins Quota formula which restricted immigration using quotas based on keeping the existing population of white Northern and Western Europeans. It took the leadership and diplomacy of President Lyndon B. Johnson, who supported the 1965 Act, to convince a critical opponent, Congressman Michael Feighan (D-Ohio), to support its passage and abolish the National Origins Quota.

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 is significant because it created the structure and remains the foundation for our current immigration laws. It changed American immigration policy to a family reunification and merit-based policy. Most importantly, it eliminated the National Origins Quota. Its unintended consequences have led to a shift in the demographics of America with more immigrants coming from Latin America, Africa, and Asia. These changes have led to a more diverse population that has enriched our country. However, it has also led to anti-immigrant sentiments once again. It is important to understand this Act to better understand our country’s multicultural identity.
"A nation that was built by the immigrants of all lands can ask those who now seek admission, ‘What can you do for our country?’ ‘But we should not be asking, ‘In what country were you born?’”

- President Lyndon Baines Johnson, 1964 State of the Union address, January 8th, 1964

Introduction

The 1960s were a time of change in America, with political unrest and the civil rights movement. After President John F. Kennedy’s assassination in 1963, Vice President Lyndon Johnson became President and committed to following through on Kennedy’s agenda. Kennedy had advocated for immigration reform while he had served in the House and Senate. In his 1958 book, A Nation of Immigrants, then Senator Kennedy said “Immigration policy should be generous; it should be fair; it should be flexible. With such a policy we can turn to the world, and to our own past, with clean hands and a clear conscience.”

President Johnson fulfilled Kennedy’s promise for a more equitable country with the passage of The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Now it was time for the country to deal with its racist and xenophobic immigration policies.

After decades of debate over immigration policy, the passage of The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (also known as the Hart-Celler Act) broadened access to America.

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1 Lyndon Baines Johnson, "State of the Union" (address, House of Representatives chamber of the U.S. Capitol, January 8, 1964).
Through the abolishment of the National Origins Quota and its greater emphasis on family reunification, the Act established the structure for current U.S. immigration laws and changed the face of America. However, passage was uncertain, and it took the leadership and diplomacy of President Johnson, to convince a critical opponent, Congressman Michael Feighan (D-Ohio), to support the legislation. By abolishing the National Origins Quota, the Act has led to a dramatic and long-lasting shift in the demographics of America over the last fifty-seven years.

**Immigration History**

Since its beginning, America has been a land of immigrants, either coming voluntarily or through force against their will. There have been several waves of voluntary immigration due to political unrest, and the desire for religious freedom and economic opportunity. In the early 1900s, immigrants had been entering through America’s open door policy (for Northern and Western Europeans) at a rate of a million each year, but World War I changed attitudes toward immigration, leading to several restrictive immigration laws such as the Emergency Quota Act of 1921, the National Origins Quota of 1924, and the McCarran-Walter Act.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 denied entry for immigrants from China. It was the first racist act to bar a specific nationality from immigration. It was directed toward Chinese laborers, who had been described as machine-like and competitors with Americans for jobs.

The 1919 recession, high unemployment and anti-immigrant fears led to the passage of The Emergency Quota Act of 1921. The Act introduced the first quota system, limiting immigration by quotas based on country of birth. Annual quotas for each country of origin took

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up three percent of the total foreign-born persons from that country, as reported in the 1910 census.  

A National Origins Quota written in the Immigration Act of 1924 restricted the number of immigrants allowed entry into America. The quota provided immigration visas to two percent of people of each nationality, as of the 1890 census, but completely excluded immigrants from Asia. The Act was intended to severely restrict immigrants from countries in Southern and Eastern Europe such as Italy and Russia (Appendix A). Senator David A. Reed (D-Pennsylvania), an advocate of the Act, argued it would result in a “more homogeneous nation” because “these new peoples spoke strange languages,” and “the races of men who have been coming to us in recent years are wholly dissimilar to the native-born Americans.”

The McCarran-Walter Act, also known as the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, upheld the Immigration Act of 1924. The opponents of the Act argued it was discriminatory, but supporters argued it was necessary to keep communists out of the country during the Cold War. Patriotic organizations, such as the Daughters of the American Revolution and the American Legion, campaigned in Congress for its approval. Based on the 1920 census, two-thirds of the 154,657 spots available each year were granted to immigrants from Great Britain, Ireland, and Germany. However, the Act did remove racial barriers for Asian immigrants from Japan and China, which were given small quotas. President Truman vetoed the bill in June 1952, asking instead for an act that abolished the quota system and a refugee act. However, he was overridden

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7 David Reed, ”America of The Melting Pot Comes to End: Effects of New Immigration Legislation Described by Senate Sponsor of Bill -- chief aim, he states, is to preserve racial type as it exists here today.” New York Times, April 27th, 1924. ProQuest.
by Congress, and in December of 1952, the Act took effect. The McCarran-Walter Act set America’s immigration standards for thirteen years until new legislation was passed in 1965.  

**Kennedy’s Immigration Policies**

Opponents of the McCarran-Walter Act continued to pursue abolishing the quota system, but it took several years before their efforts were successful.

On February 19, 1959, then Senator Kennedy (D-Massachusetts), proposed a new bill to revise immigration policy by using a “blood relationship” formula so that only relatives of current citizens and immigrants in America could immigrate. After receiving criticism, Kennedy altered his proposal to add slots for refugees and “new seed” immigrants. During Kennedy’s presidential campaign in 1960, he promised he would revise immigration laws. With Johnson as his running mate, Kennedy won the election. However, Kennedy was unable to follow through with his promise because he was assassinated in 1963.

Kennedy’s assassination left Lyndon Johnson to deliver on his agenda. Johnson was focused mainly on the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, but he would use his negotiating skills to modify racist immigration policies. Political cartoons in this period portrayed Johnson as a leader who tied immigration to democratic values and wanted to remove racist elements from existing laws (Appendix B).

**The Debaters: Immigration Restrictionists vs. Immigration Reformers**

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In January 1964, Johnson used diplomacy to encourage Congress to pass immigration legislation in his State of the Union address stating: "‘What can you do for our country?’, ‘But we should not be asking, ‘In what country were you born?’”\(^{12}\)

In Congress, the debate was between immigration restrictionists and immigration reformers. The restrictionists were largely Southern Democrats that would later become Republicans, and the reformers were made up of mostly northern Democratic and Republican Congressmen. Restrictionists wanted to maintain the ethnic makeup of America by limiting the number of immigrants allowed in the country and the gene pool. They also believed in eugenics as another way to preserve the demographics of America.

Key restrictionists were Representative Michael Feighan (D-Ohio), the Chairman of the House of Representatives Immigration subcommittee, and Senator James O. Eastland (D-Mississippi), the Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Another key restrictionist was Senator Pat McCarran (D-Nevada), sponsor of the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952. McCarran participated in many hearings against reformers such as Representative Emanuel Celler (D-New York) and Senator Philip Hart (D-Michigan), authors of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. Celler described McCarran’s bill as “disguised exclusion”, arguing that the Senator’s bill was racist. \(^{13}\) Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D- Massachusetts), and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy (D- Massachusetts), the assassinated President’s brothers, fought for immigration reform because the old system failed to serve the national interest of adding skilled immigrants and it was cruel to separate families.”\(^{14}\)


Public sentiment at the time was in favor of removing the national origins quota, and replacing it with a new preference system based on individual occupational skills (Appendix C). President Johnson would need to unite both the restrictionists and reformers to guarantee the Act’s passage.

**Failure and The Rocky Road to Passage, and Success Through Diplomacy**

It took almost twenty-one months from President Johnson’s State of the Union Address on January 8, 1964, to the signing of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 on October 3, 1965. There were failures, delays from opponents, and eventually success after many negotiations and compromises (Appendix D).

Lyndon Johnson (D- Texas) had worked in Washington since 1931 and had served in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. In 1955, he was elected the Senate majority leader. He knew he would need to convince other Southern Democrats like himself such as Senator Eastland and Feighan to agree to immigration reform. Johnson’s style of leadership, known as the “Johnson Treatment” was to push and persuade others using flattery and threats (coercive diplomacy). He compromised with his former Congressional colleagues to get immigration legislation passed.

President Johnson used these political skills and telephone diplomacy to intervene with Feighan, who had been delaying the immigration bill. Johnson also used gifts such as inviting Feighan to White House dinners and on Air Force One in order to get his support.

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Johnson used his speeches to effectively promote his administration’s immigration policies. In remarks to Congressmen and Italian-Americans on September 18, 1964, Johnson tied immigration to civil rights: “We are committed to eliminating discrimination in our society. I believe we should also eliminate discrimination in the laws relating to those who would join our society from abroad.”\(^\text{18}\) At his January 4, 1965 State of the Union Address, Johnson addressed immigration reform again, signaling to Congress and the rest of the world that new immigration legislation was nearing and that America welcomed immigrants no matter their birthplace, “to those in other lands that are seeking the promise of America, through an immigration law based on the work a man can do and not where he was born or how he spells his name.”\(^\text{19}\)

Judiciary Committee Chairman Celler first introduced H.R. 2580 on January 15th, 1965 to the House of Representatives, prompted by Johnson’s address. The restrictionists and the reformers agreed the National Origins Quota system needed to be changed but disagreed on how to achieve this, leading to many hearings between restrictionist Feighan and reformer Celler.\(^\text{20}\) Celler and Feighan had publicly feuded over immigration policies, particularly when Feighan introduced his bill on June 1, 1965. The Representatives opposed several sections of the other’s bills. The proposed Celler and Administration bill set quota preferences at 50% for highly skilled immigrants and 50% for families of U.S. citizens or resident aliens, while the Feighan bill set family-based preferences at 60% of quotas and skilled immigrants at 10% (Appendix E).\(^\text{21}\)

Johnson eventually compromised and convinced Feighan to approve Celler’s bill by incorporating a higher preference for family reunification in order to get the bill passed. On August 3, 1965, the House Judiciary Committee voted in favor of H.R. 2580. This was the major turning point that led to the House passing H.R. 2580 by a vote of 318-95 on August 25th, 1965. In a phone conversation with his Attorney General, Nicholas Katzenbach, on August 26, 1965, Johnson referred to Senator Eastland’s support on immigration: “Tell him you're going to get his judge in Mississippi for him.”

Johnson knew what he had to offer in exchange for Eastland’s support. The bill later passed the Senate by voice vote on September 22, 1965, with pushes from Celler and Feighan.

Feighan wanted the Act to focus on family reunification because he believed this would continue to restrict non-Europeans. However, he was proven wrong as most Europeans who wanted to had already immigrated, leading to non-Europeans taking advantage of the family reunification and merit preference categories.

For the first time, the Act restricted immigration from the Western Hemisphere by adding an immigrant limit, a particularly controversial section. Celler especially disagreed, worried it would damage the relationship between the sister republics.

Finally, on October 3rd, 1965, President Johnson signed the Act on Liberty Island in New York Harbor, next to the Statue of Liberty, America’s symbol of immigration (Appendix F). He said “this bill that we will sign today is not a revolutionary bill. It does not affect the lives of millions.” However, Johnson was mistaken about its impact.

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**Impact: The Act’s Historical Significance**

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 greatly impacted the lives of millions and changed who would become an American. Most importantly, it abolished the National Origins Quota. It allowed each country the same number of visas based on new visa preference categories, family reunification, and skills-based immigration, ending discrimination against non-northern Europeans. The Act restricted immigrants from the Western Hemisphere for the first time, which led to the start of illegal immigration.

The long-term impact of the Act is still significant today. The legislation had several unintended consequences. Family reunification has become the leading method for immigrants to enter America, with 69% of immigrants using family-sponsored visas in 2019 (Appendix G). Recently, former President Trump described family reunification negatively as chain migration.

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 has resulted in our diverse multicultural American society. Its unintended consequences led to a shift in the demographics with more immigrants coming from Latin America, Africa, and Asia (Mexico, China, and India are the top three countries of birth). The percentage of the U.S. population that is foreign-born went from 4.7% in 1970 to 13.7% in 2018. Immigrants and their descendants accounted for 72 million in U.S. population growth from 1965-to 2015, according to Pew Research (Appendix G).

The Act created the structure for current immigration laws.

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Conclusion

While the debate over the National Origins Quota and immigration policy had gone on for decades, it was President Johnson who delivered on the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 using the “Johnson Treatment” style of diplomacy. The immigration debate continues today. Former President Trump’s “Build the Wall” anti-immigrant campaign resembles the arguments of the restrictionists in the 1920s. With the trend towards a majority minority country, we may continue to see a backlash against nonwhite immigration.

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, a key part of history that is often overlooked, has changed our multicultural American identity. Our immigration laws no longer discriminate against a person’s national origin, and America has become a diverse land. Immigrants from many different cultures have progressed and enriched our country. It is important to understand this Act to better understand our country.
This diagram shows how the Immigration Act of 1924 would affect European immigration rates.
This cartoon by Herblock after the 1965 State of the Union Address shows Johnson pointing to a Founding Father indicating that immigration laws should be consistent with our values of equality.
This cartoon by Herblock shows Johnson ready to remove the racist National Origins Quota System.
Appendix C

Attitudes about Immigration Policy at Time of 1965 Immigration Act

One of the proposed changes in the immigration laws is to base quotas on the skills of people to be admitted to the United States rather than on the basis of their country of origin. Would you be in favor of such a change in the immigration laws or do you think a country quota system is right? Harris, May 1965

Now I want to hand you a list of bills passed by this last Congress. For each, tell me if you approve or disapprove of that bill from what you know or have heard of it... Immigration based on individual skill rather than country quota Harris, December 1965

36% Skills 29% Country 15% No difference 20% Not sure 70% Approve 30% Disapprove

How important do you think each of the following factors should be in determining whether or not a person from another country should be admitted to live in the United States? Gallup, June 1965

That he has occupational skills

*Very important 71%
Not very important 21%
No opinion 8%

The country in which he was born

*Very important 32%
Not very important 56%
No opinion 11%

Americans’ 1965 Views on Standards for U.S. Immigration

How important do you think each of the following factors should be in determining whether or not a person from another country should be admitted to live in the United States -- very important, or not very important?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Not very important</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>That he has occupational skills</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That he has relatives, who are American citizens, with whom he can live</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The country in which he was born</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

GALLUP, JUNE 24-29, 1965


I created this original timeline using dates and events critical to my topic.
This graph shows a comparison of Feighan’s and Johnson’s bill quota preference categories.
This photo is of President Lyndon B. Johnson signing the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 on October 3, 1965 at Liberty Island in New York Harbor.

http://www.lbjlibrary.net/collections/photo-archive.html
This shows family reunification as the primary way that most immigrants come to the U.S.
This graph shows the impact of the 1965 Immigration Act on the percentage of foreign born citizens of America from 4.7% to 13.7%.

Mexico, China and India are among top birthplaces for immigrants in the U.S.

Top five countries of birth for immigrants in the U.S. in 2018, in millions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Share among all immigrants</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: China includes Macau, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mongolia.
Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of 2018 American Community Survey (IPUMS).

This graph shows the top birthplaces of immigrants in America in 2018.
This graph shows the contrast between America’s racial and ethnic makeup from 1965 to 2015.
This graph shows the difference between America’s foreign born population from 1965 to 2015 and predicts it will grow exponentially.

This graph shows immigrants and descendants in U.S. population growth.
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources


This newspaper article shows an opinion of a U.S. citizen on a section of the immigration bill, providing me with an accurate representation of ordinary citizens' views on the bill.


This cartoon by Herblock shows President Johnson ready to remove the racist National Origins Quota System, which was an important source for me.


This cartoon by Herblock after the 1965 State of the Union Address shows Johnson pointing to a Founding Father indicating that immigration laws should be consistent with our values of equality, which was an important source for me.


This newspaper article provided me with an understanding of the process the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 had to go through to get passed.


This newspaper article shows the rivalry between Celler and Feighan, one of my points in my paper.


This newspaper article describes the conflict between restrictionists and reformers, the main debate in my paper.


This newspaper article informed me on the provisions in the 1965 Immigration Act.

This source was vital for me, as it showed a helpful graph and contained information I needed for my main debate.


This source shows Kennedy's mindset and ideas when it came to immigration.


This source delves into the theme of Debate and Diplomacy again, helping me to link the topic to the theme.


This newspaper article shows me the debate over the bill in the Senate.


This source was focused on the debating of restrictionist James Eastland. It was a key source to learn about a restrictionist's argument.


This source was another example of debate in my paper. It also shows a restrictionist's point of view.


This newspaper article describes the debate and coaxing of the process of passing the 1965 Immigration Act.


This source presents the provisions in the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 and the revised quotas, as contrasted to the original National Origins Quota.


This newspaper article shows the importance of this bill at the time, as the Daughters of the American Revolution were highly respected.


This newspaper article describes how Michael Feighan was convinced by Johnson to make changes to the immigration system, one of the key points in my paper.


This speech was vital to me, as it contained the first mention of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 and prompted reformers to do something.

This was one of my most important sources because it revealed that Celler was frustrated with Feighan's delays and how he asked President Johnson to intervene. Kennedy, John F. "Admitting Immigrants: Senator Explains Provisions of Bill for Entry of Non-Relatives." New York Times (1923-), 1959, p. 34. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.

This source contains a letter from Kennedy attempting to clarify the provisions of a bill for the entry of non-relatives to the editor of the New York Times.


This source provided me with a source showing Robert Kennedy's views on immigration and also shows Robert Kennedy's willingness to continue his brother's legacy by passing this bill.


This source was key for me to understand how the Johnson administration convinced people to support them.


This web page provided a good background for my research.


This newspaper article describes the debate over the Western Hemisphere ceiling provision in the 1965 Immigration Act.


This article describes the opinion of a U.S. citizen on the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.


This image showed President Lyndon B. Johnson signing the Immigration Act of 1965 while others looked on. This source was important because it showed who was part of the Immigration Act of 1965 signing.


This source shows a study that predicts what would happen to America if the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 was never passed.


This source had several good quotes I could add to my paper, making it an excellent resource for the time.

This newspaper article describes the provisions of the 1965 Immigration Act and how it would change our demographics.


This source contained LBJ's speech at the signing of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, an important resource for my heart of the story.


This source explained the Johnson administration's stance on immigration.

Secondary Sources

This source contained many helpful graphs that backed up my thesis, so I used it quite often.


This web page shows the impact of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act on our demographics even 50 years later.


This web page was a great source for me because I learned a lot about how we used a form of eugenics and how we stopped because of the Nazis.


This reference source was especially important for my paper because it was where I first learned about the "Johnson Treatment" and President Johnson's relationship with Michael Feighan.


This website gave me important information on the public opinion of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.


This source was helpful by providing several names of key reformers and restrictionists.


This source had a good overall summary of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, helping me with my timeline.


This web page provided me with an explanation of why U.S. immigration suddenly dipped from a million to a hundred thousand immigrants each year.

This reference article helped me understand better the impact of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 and the Immigration and Nationality Services Act of 1965.


This web page shows how the Immigration and Nationality Services Act of 1965 impacted the immigrants coming into the U.S. and how it effectively spread diversity.


This blog detailed how Lyndon B. Johnson used the "Johnson Treatment", a form of diplomacy to convince others. This was helpful to me because this year's theme is Debate and Diplomacy.


This reference source details the significance of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952.


This source also had many graphs that I put in my appendices.


This reference source explains the debate of the overarching topic of U.S.A. immigration policy.


This website contained important information on what U.S. citizens thought during that time.


This primary source explains why President Truman did not want to approve the McCarran Walter Act, the act that preceded the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.


This web page presented me with an accurate timeline of U.S. immigration history, which I used to make my own. It also showed me the impact of the several acts that had been passed, along with good background information.

This source went into depth on family reunification, the main reason our demographics have shifted so much.


This webpage shows the different views on immigration policies.