

Transcript: National Migration Policies

Across the world, policymakers are responsible for managing immigration, and deciding how many of which types of people should be let into their countries.

They typically frame these important decisions around three major goals.

Immigration policy should

- respond to national economic needs,
- align with national security priorities, and
- reflect national values.

Examples from American history illustrate how each of these goals influences anti- or pro-immigration policy.

Opponents of immigration claim that it displaces native workers and undercuts their wages.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 reflects this perspective. Following waves of Chinese immigration during the Gold Rush, the fear of cheap Chinese labor—along with widespread racist views—led to the first major law restricting immigration to the U.S.

Conversely, pro-immigration voices argue that immigrant workers can fill critical gaps in the labor market and stimulate economic growth.

This was the goal of the Bracero Program of 1942. It awarded farm work contracts to more than 4.5 million Mexican migrants, as the United States prepared for an anticipated World War II labor shortage.

And more recently, the H-1B visa program was created in 1990 to allow in more skilled foreign workers to support new high-technology sectors.

The anti-immigration position often views migrants as national threats, possibly seeking to commit espionage or terrorism.

While anti-Semitism played a major role, this argument was cited when the U.S. turned away the *MS St. Louis*—a ship carrying 937 mostly Jewish passengers fleeing Nazi persecution—in 1939. Immigration opponents

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characterized the passengers as potential German spies or as Communist agitators.

Meanwhile, some policymakers support immigration, arguing that it can be an effective way to gain valuable intelligence from—and undermine—rival countries.

This was the intent of the Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966, a Cold War policy, which fast-tracked Cubans to permanent residency, seeking to subvert the rise of communism and Fidel Castro.

Some anti-immigration voices assert that immigrants should reflect the racial and religious preferences of the recipient country—as typically defined by an in-power majority.

The Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 expressed this view. Supported by nativist groups like the Immigration Restriction League and the Ku Klux Klan, the policy established stricter nation-based quotas, limiting immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, and favoring white Protestants from Western and Northern Europe.

On the other side, advocates believe immigration reflects the values of humanitarianism and egalitarianism—that all humans are worth helping and deserve equal rights. Thus they argue immigration policy should not be discriminatory.

This belief led to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. Influenced by the Civil Rights Movement, this policy ended nation-based quotas and set up new visa categories for immigrants with special skills or family connections.

To understand immigration policy, it's helpful to consider these goals of national economics, security, and values, which policymakers use to justify decisions that can affect millions of people in search of a better life.