

# Prior To The Immigration Act Of 1965, The Highest Number Legal Immigrants To America Under The Old Immigration

**Prior To The Immigration Act Of 1965, The Highest Number Legal Immigrants To America Under The Old Immigration** was a period marked by strict quotas and limited opportunities for many prospective immigrants. Before this pivotal legislation reshaped U.S. immigration policies, the country's immigration system was primarily governed by the Immigration Act of 1924, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act. This law drastically limited immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia while favoring immigrants from Northern and Western Europe. As a result, the number of legal immigrants arriving in the United States was heavily restricted, often favoring certain nationalities over others.

Understanding the landscape of immigration prior to 1965 involves examining the quotas established by the 1924 law, the dominant immigrant groups during this period, and the historical factors that influenced migration patterns. This article explores these themes in detail to shed light on the highest number of legal immigrants to America under the old immigration system before the transformative changes brought about by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

## The Immigration Act of 1924 and Its Impact on Immigration Numbers

### The Quota System and Its Foundations

The Immigration Act of 1924 was designed to set strict limits on immigration, reflecting the nativist attitudes prevalent in America at the time. It established national origins quotas based on the 1890 U.S. Census, favoring immigrants from Northern and Western Europe while severely restricting those from Southern and Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa.

- **Quota Allocation:** Each nationality was assigned a quota based on its percentage of the U.S. population in 1890, with a maximum of 2% of that population allowed to immigrate annually.
- **Purpose:** The law aimed to preserve the existing ethnic composition of the U.S. and limit the influence of undesired groups.
- **Restrictions:** Countries outside of Northern and Western Europe faced significant restrictions, with many Asian and African nations effectively barred from immigration.

## Effects on Immigration Numbers

This law resulted in a sharp decline in overall immigration, especially from regions that had previously contributed sizable immigrant populations.

- **Overall Decline:** Immigration numbers dropped from a peak of over 1 million annually in the early 1900s to approximately 150,000–200,000 in the 1930s and 1940s.
- **Dominant Immigrant Groups:** The largest groups came from Northern and Western Europe, particularly the British Isles, Germany, and Scandinavia.
- **Limited Diversity:** Immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, such as Italians, Poles, and Russians, was severely curtailed due to the quotas.

## Leading Countries Contributing Legal Immigrants Before 1965

### Major Sources of Immigration

Prior to the 1965 legislation, the United States saw significant immigration from specific countries, with patterns shaped by economic opportunities, political upheavals, and existing immigrant communities.

1. **United Kingdom and Ireland:** Historically, English and Irish immigrants constituted the largest share of the immigrant population, benefiting from proximity and familiar cultural ties.
2. **Germany:** German immigrants, fleeing political unrest and economic hardship, formed a substantial community in the U.S., especially in the Midwest.
3. **Scandinavia:** Norway, Sweden, and Denmark contributed sizable immigrant populations, often settling in rural and industrial regions.
4. **Italy and Eastern Europe:** Despite quotas, Italian, Polish, Russian, and Jewish immigrants arrived in notable numbers, often through loopholes or family reunification policies.
5. **Canada and Other Countries:** Smaller numbers also came from Canada, Mexico, and other parts of the world, though migration from Asia and Africa was heavily restricted.

## Immigration Trends and Patterns

During this period, immigrant communities often settled in urban centers, forming vibrant neighborhoods that retained their cultural identities.

- **Urban Concentrations:** Cities like New York, Chicago, Boston, and Philadelphia became hubs of immigrant life.
- **Family Reunification:** Family-based immigration policies allowed many to bring relatives, increasing the size of established communities.
- **Employment Opportunities:** Industrialization fueled demand for labor, attracting immigrants to work in factories, mines, and railroads.

## Legal Immigration Numbers and Records Before 1965

### Peak Immigration Years and Their Numbers

Although overall numbers declined after the 1924 law, certain years still experienced notable immigration surges due to geopolitical events or policy changes.

- **Early 1900s Peak:** The years 1900–1914 saw the highest legal immigration numbers, with over 1 million immigrants arriving annually.
- **Post-World War I:** Immigration decreased during the war years but saw some recovery afterward.
- **Great Depression and World War II:** Numbers dropped sharply during the 1930s and early 1940s due to economic hardship and global conflict.

### Most Immigrants From Specific Countries

While precise data varies, some countries consistently contributed the majority of legal immigrants under the old system:

- **Germany:** Approximately 20–25% of all immigrants in the early 20th century were German.

- **United Kingdom and Ireland:** Together, these groups made up roughly 30% of legal immigrants before 1924.
- **Italy and Eastern Europe:** These regions contributed a combined 15-20%, often through chain migration and family reunification.

## The Significance of the Immigration Patterns Before 1965

### Demographic and Cultural Influence

The composition of immigrants prior to 1965 created a diverse yet racially and ethnically stratified society. The dominance of certain groups influenced American culture, politics, and economic development.

- **Ethnic Neighborhoods:** Cities developed distinct neighborhoods like Little Italy, Polish Hill, and Scandinavian enclaves.
- **Religious Diversity:** Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, and Orthodox communities grew significantly, shaping religious and cultural landscapes.
- **Labor Movements:** Immigrant workers played vital roles in unionization efforts and industrial growth.

### Limitations and Challenges of the Old Immigration System

Despite the contributions of immigrant communities, the old system faced criticism for its racial and ethnic biases, restrictive quotas, and inability to adapt to changing global realities.

- **Discrimination:** Many deserving applicants, especially from Asia and parts of Southern and Eastern Europe, faced barriers or outright bans.
- **Family Reunification Limitations:** Strict quotas often prevented families from reuniting, leading to prolonged separations.
- **Shift Toward Reform:** The limitations of the old system spurred calls for comprehensive immigration reform, culminating in the 1965 overhaul.

# The Legacy of Pre-1965 Immigration and Its Transformation

## The Changes Brought by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965

The passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 marked a turning point, abolishing the national origins quotas and establishing a new, more equitable system based on reuniting families and attracting skilled workers.

- **Increased Diversity:** Post-1965, immigration from Asia, Africa, and Latin America surged, diversifying the American population.
- **Modern Immigration Trends:** The new policies enabled a broader range of countries to contribute immigrants, leading to demographic shifts.

## Historical Reflection

Examining the period before 1965 reveals the roots of America's multicultural identity, shaped by European migration and exclusionary policies. While these policies limited diversity and opportunity for many, they also laid the groundwork for future reforms and the rich mosaic of modern America.

## Conclusion

Prior to the Immigration Act of 1965, the highest number of legal immigrants to America came predominantly from Northern and Western Europe, especially the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany, and Scandinavia. The old immigration system, characterized by strict quotas and racial biases, restricted the entry of many groups from Southern and Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa. Despite these limitations, immigrant communities played a crucial role in shaping America's economic, cultural, and social fabric. The legacy of this period underscores the importance of reforming immigration policies to foster diversity and inclusivity—principles that continue to define the United States today.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What was the primary source of legal immigrants to America before the Immigration Act of 1965?

Before the Immigration Act of 1965, the majority of legal immigrants to America came

from Europe, particularly from countries like Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Ireland.

## **How did the Immigration Act of 1965 change the pattern of legal immigration to the United States?**

The Immigration Act of 1965 abolished national origins quotas, leading to increased immigration from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and diversifying the immigrant population.

## **Which country was the leading source of legal immigrants to the U.S. prior to 1965?**

Prior to 1965, Germany was often the leading source of legal immigrants to the United States, reflecting historical migration patterns.

## **What was the impact of the old immigration system on non-European immigrants?**

The old immigration system heavily favored Europeans, making it difficult for immigrants from other regions such as Asia, Africa, and Latin America to enter legally.

## **How did the quotas under the Immigration Act of 1924 influence immigration patterns before 1965?**

The 1924 Immigration Act established strict quotas heavily favoring Northern and Western Europeans, which limited immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe and virtually excluded others.

## **What was the highest number of legal immigrants to the U.S. in a year before 1965, and which country did they mostly come from?**

In the early 20th century, the highest number of legal immigrants to the U.S. primarily came from European countries like Italy and Germany, with annual figures reaching hundreds of thousands, though exact numbers varied year by year.

## **Additional Resources**

Prior To The Immigration Act Of 1965, The Highest Number Legal Immigrants To America Under The Old Immigration

Before the landmark Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 revolutionized U.S. immigration policy, the nation's approach to selecting and admitting immigrants was markedly different. During this pre-1965 era, the United States maintained a system

heavily skewed towards certain regions and countries, reflecting historical priorities, economic needs, and racial biases. Understanding which countries contributed the most legal immigrants during this period offers crucial insights into the demographic makeup, policy influences, and socio-economic factors that shaped America's immigrant landscape prior to the sweeping reforms of the mid-1960s. This article explores the origins of the highest number of legal immigrants to America under the old immigration system, delving into the historical context, regional patterns, and the legislative framework that governed entry into the United States before the historic legislative overhaul.

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## Historical Context of U.S. Immigration Policy Before 1965

### The Roots of Restrictive Immigration Laws

America's immigration history prior to 1965 was characterized by a series of laws that favored certain nationalities over others, often reflecting the country's economic needs and racial biases. The Immigration Act of 1924, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act, established quotas based on national origins, heavily favoring Northern and Western Europeans while severely restricting immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa.

This system was rooted in the belief that certain groups were more "desirable" and aligned with the racial and cultural composition of the majority population. Consequently, countries like the United Kingdom, Germany, and Ireland contributed large numbers of immigrants, while many others faced restrictive quotas or outright bans.

### The Quota System and Its Impact

The quota system set limits on the number of immigrants from each country, based on the 1890 U.S. Census, favoring northern Europeans. This policy remained largely unchanged until the 1965 act. Under this system, countries with larger populations in the U.S. or those viewed favorably received higher quotas, resulting in significant immigrant flows from specific regions.

### Major Source Regions

During the first half of the 20th century, the primary source regions for legal immigrants included:

- Northern and Western Europe (e.g., the United Kingdom, Germany, Ireland)
- Southern and Eastern Europe (e.g., Italy, Poland, Russia)
- Some Asian countries, but with severe restrictions (e.g., China, Japan)
- Latin America, though largely undocumented until later periods

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## The Leading Countries of Origin for Legal Immigrants Under the Old Immigration System

### 1. United Kingdom

#### Historical Significance and Numbers:

The United Kingdom consistently topped the list of countries supplying legal immigrants to the United States during the early 20th century. Due to historical ties, shared language, and relatively open policies, British immigrants were among the most numerous.

#### Contributions and Settlement Patterns:

British immigrants settled across the country, particularly in urban centers like New York, Boston, and Chicago. They contributed significantly to industrial labor, commerce, and cultural institutions.

#### Legislative Impact:

The British influx was largely unaffected by quotas until the 1924 law, which limited European immigration overall but still allowed considerable numbers due to the large population and established migration patterns.

### 2. Germany

#### Historical Significance and Numbers:

Germany was another major source, with millions migrating to the U.S. from the mid-19th century through the early 20th century. German immigrants often arrived in waves driven by economic hardship, political unrest, and religious persecution.

#### Contributions and Settlement Patterns:

German communities thrived especially in the Midwest—cities like Milwaukee, Cincinnati, and St. Louis—forming vibrant cultural enclaves and contributing to agriculture, industry, and civic life.

#### Legislative Impact:

German immigration was substantial enough to influence American culture, but restrictive policies of the 1920s curtailed further influxes, especially during periods of rising nativism.

### 3. Ireland

#### Historical Significance and Numbers:

The Irish represented one of the earliest and largest immigrant groups, particularly in the 19th century during and after the Great Famine (1845–1852). Irish immigrants faced discrimination but also established deep roots in American society.

#### Contributions and Settlement Patterns:

Irish communities flourished mainly in urban centers such as Boston, New York City, and Chicago, often working in construction, manufacturing, and political machines.

#### Legislative Impact:

Despite quotas, the Irish continued to migrate in large numbers due to chain migration and family reunification, often bypassing strict limitations through informal channels.

### 4. Italy

#### Historical Significance and Numbers:

Italian migration surged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, driven by poverty,

political instability, and economic opportunity in America. Italians primarily migrated from southern Italy, facing significant discrimination upon arrival.

#### Contributions and Settlement Patterns:

They established vibrant ethnic neighborhoods in cities like New York's Little Italy, Chicago, and Philadelphia, contributing to construction, food industries, and small businesses.

#### Legislative Impact:

While the 1924 quota system limited Italian immigration, large numbers continued to arrive through family reunification and undocumented channels.

### 5. Russia and Eastern Europe

#### Historical Significance and Numbers:

Large numbers of Jews, Poles, Ukrainians, and other Eastern Europeans migrated to escape persecution, pogroms, and economic hardship.

#### Contributions and Settlement Patterns:

Many settled in urban areas, forming tight-knit communities that preserved their cultural identities. Jewish immigrants, in particular, played vital roles in commerce, arts, and activism.

#### Legislative Impact:

Immigration from Russia and Eastern Europe was heavily restricted after the 1924 law but remained significant before its enactment.

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### Factors Influencing Immigration Patterns Before 1965

#### Economic Opportunities

The U.S. industrial economy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries created a high demand for unskilled and semi-skilled labor, attracting many from Europe. Immigrants filled vital roles in factories, railroads, and construction.

#### Political and Religious Persecution

Many migrants fled political upheavals, wars, and religious persecution, notably Jews escaping Eastern Europe and Catholics fleeing Ireland and Italy.

#### Chain Migration and Family Reunification

Once initial migrants established themselves, they facilitated subsequent arrivals through family reunification, creating ethnic enclaves that further sustained migration flows from specific countries.

#### Restrictions and Quotas

Despite the large numbers from certain countries, the quota system limited overall

immigration from many regions, especially Asia and Southern/Eastern Europe, shaping the demographic composition of immigrants during this period.

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## The Impact of These Immigration Patterns on American Society

### Cultural Contributions

European immigrants introduced diverse languages, cuisines, religious practices, and cultural festivals, enriching American multiculturalism.

### Economic Development

Immigrants played critical roles in America's economic expansion, especially during the rapid industrialization of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

### Urbanization

Large immigrant populations contributed to urban growth, shaping city landscapes, labor markets, and social dynamics.

### Social Tensions and Nativism

The influx of certain groups also led to nativist sentiments, restrictive policies, and social tensions that influenced legislative changes, culminating in the 1924 Immigration Act.

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## The Shift Post-1965 and Its Significance

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 marked a turning point, dismantling the racially biased quota system and opening America's doors to immigrants from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The legacy of the pre-1965 period, characterized by European dominance in immigrant origins, gave way to a more diverse demographic landscape.

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## Conclusion

Prior to the Immigration Act of 1965, the United States received a substantial number of legal immigrants primarily from Northern and Western Europe, with significant contributions from the United Kingdom, Germany, Ireland, Italy, and Eastern European countries like Russia. These immigrant groups shaped the cultural, social, and economic fabric of America, establishing enduring communities and contributing to the nation's growth.

Understanding this historical context highlights how legislative policies, economic needs, and global events influenced migration patterns. The legacy of these early immigrant groups continues to influence American society today, serving as a testament to the country's longstanding tradition of immigration—albeit one shaped by the policies and

biases of its time.

As the nation moved toward the more inclusive policies enacted in 1965 and beyond, the demographic landscape diversified further, reflecting a broader spectrum of global origins. Nonetheless, the foundational contributions of European immigrants prior to 1965 remain a vital chapter in the story of American immigration.

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