

U.S. Immigration Law Milestones

1964: Civil Rights Act enacted, outlawing discrimination based on race, religion, sex, or national origin and prohibiting unequal application of voter registration requirements, racial segregation in schools, employment, and public accommodations.

1965-1968: Hart-Celler Immigration and Nationality Act abolished preferential quotas based on national origin, race, and ancestry, and created a seven-category preference system, which gave priority to relatives of U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents, and to professionals. It set numerical quotas for every country, but also reduced Latin American immigration from previous levels.

1974: Jackson-Vanik amendment to the Trade Act limited U.S. trade relations with countries with non-market economies (originally, countries of the Communist bloc) that restrict freedom of emigration and other human rights.

1980: Refugee Act established a separate admissions policy for refugees, eliminating the previous geographical and ideological criteria, and defining “refugee” according to United Nations norms. It set a separate target for refugees at 50,000 and reduced the annual worldwide ceiling for immigrants to 270,000.

1986: Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) provided amnesty and temporary status to undocumented persons who had lived in the United States continuously since before January 1, 1982; extended a separate, more lenient amnesty to farm workers; imposed sanctions on employers hiring illegal aliens; and increased inspection and enforcement at U.S. borders.

1990: Immigration Act (IMMACT) modified and expanded upon the 1965 act, retaining family reunification as the major entry path, while more than doubling employment-related immigration. The law also provided for the admission of immigrants from underrepresented countries [such as Ireland] to increase the “diversity” of the immigrant flow.

2002: Homeland Security Act created the Department for Homeland Security to cover all immigration enforcement and adjudication. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (or ICE) agency is created, replacing the former Department of Immigration and Naturalization (INS).

2005: REAL ID Act required use of IDs meeting certain security standards to enter government buildings, board planes, open bank accounts, and set more restriction on political asylum, increases immigration enforcement mechanism, alters judicial review.

2006: Secure Fence Act authorized construction of a border fence along U.S.-Mexico border.

2012: Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Executive Order by President Barack Obama allowed for young adults who had been brought illegally to the U.S. as children to apply for deportation relief and temporary work permits.

2017: Immigration Ban enacted by President Donald Trump to ban immigration from seven Muslim-majority nations. Courts subsequently halt implementation.

DACA program cancelled by President Trump by executive order as of March 5, 2018. Cancellation delayed by court order.