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Immigration Shaping America: A Journey of Policy and Legacy for the Presidential Elections

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Top Issues of the United States Presidential Elections

There are more or less 78 days until the U.S. Presidential election on November 5, 2024, and we decided to discuss the top six issues critical to electing the new President. In the coming weeks, we will delve into these critical topics:

- Economy and Inflation
- Healthcare
- Immigration
- Climate Change and Environment
- Crime and Public Safety
- Education

The United States, with a population nearing 335 million, is a diverse nation where approximately 46.2 million individuals, or 13.8% of the population, were born in other countries.

From 2021 to 2023, the primary engine of the United States population expansion has been immigration, with the number of newcomers surpassing the natural increase resulting from more births than deaths. The population grew 1.6 million between 2022 and 2023, of which immigration accounted for 1.1 million (68%), while natural growth contributed 504,000 (32%).

We chose to begin with immigration because it has been a defining issue throughout American history, shaping the nation's identity, economy, and culture. Understanding the current immigration debate is crucial for grasping the broader challenges and opportunities facing the U.S. today.

While many other issues are significant, we will focus on these six and explore the other in future columns.

What is North America?

North America, a continent of unique character, is shaped by its diverse cultures, languages, and histories. Its dynamism and uniqueness are deeply rooted in the story of immigration. This narrative is not just a historical fact but a powerful concept that has continuously molded America from its inception to the present day. We explore the immigration journey through pivotal moments in history that begin with the establishment of the United States and end with the current status of immigration in the U.S.

The Birth of the United States

The birth of the United States is intrinsically tied to immigration. The first wave of immigrants included settlers from Britain and other European countries, such as Scotland, Ireland, Germany, the Netherlands, and France. These individuals arrived for various reasons: some sought religious freedom, others economic opportunity, and some sought refuge from political persecution. Alongside voluntary migrants, enslaved Africans were forcibly brought to the colonies and stripped of their rights, dignity, and humanity.

Native Americans were displaced, dispossessed, and significantly reduced in numbers due to settler expansion. Eventually, after the U.S. became independent in 1776, the new nation established naturalization laws that granted citizenship to any free white person of good character who had resided in the U.S. for a specified period. The U.S. encouraged further European immigration, especially after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and expanding its frontier westward.

Founded by immigrants who brought their cultures, languages, and religions, the nation benefitted from the rich contributions of these groups. However, the U.S. faced the challenge of integrating these diverse populations, often considered outsiders by native-born citizens. Moreover, the nation grappled with the paradox of promoting liberty and equality while denying these same rights to enslaved people, Native Americans, and women.

The Great Migration of 1880 to 1924

From 1880 to 1924, the Great Migration brought over 25 million people to the United States, significantly transforming the country. Immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, Asia, and other regions arrived for economic opportunity, political freedom, and religious tolerance. They entered the U.S. through major ports like Ellis Island and Angel Island, where they underwent inspections and faced the possibility of being turned away. Many of these immigrants settled in urban areas, finding work in factories, mines, and farms, often enduring exploitation, discrimination, and hostility from native-born Americans.

Despite these obstacles, immigrant communities managed to preserve their languages, religions, and cultural practices, forming strong support networks and institutions. Their contributions to American society are evident in the arts, labor movements, and political activism. This period also saw the emergence of the "melting pot" and "mosaic" metaphors, symbolizing different approaches to integrating immigrants into American society.

World War II and U.S. Policy Toward Jewish Refugees

The U.S. entered the war in 1941 following the attack on Pearl Harbor, joining the Allies in their fight against the Axis powers. The Holocaust, the Nazi regime's genocide of Jews and other minorities in Europe, presented a significant moral challenge. While the U.S. was aware of these atrocities, it did not take substantial measures to rescue or admit Jewish refugees, with the horrific consequences that became evident after Germany lost the war.

During the war, the U.S. also interned Japanese Americans and German and Italian Americans, who were classified as enemy aliens. Despite these injustices, many immigrants and their descendants played vital roles in the war effort, serving in the military, working in war industries, and contributing to significant scientific and technological advancements.

The Lyndon Johnson Immigration Bill

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson, marked a pivotal moment in transforming the U.S. immigration system. This landmark legislation abolished the national origins quotas that favored European immigrants, replacing them with a system prioritizing

family reunification, skills, and humanitarian needs. The act opened the doors to immigrants from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and other regions, significantly enhancing the diversity of the U.S. population.

The 1965 Act was a response to the social and political changes of the era, reflecting the civil rights movement and the growing demand for equality and justice.

From Nixon to the Biden Administration

Following the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, U.S. immigration policy continued to evolve under various administrations. The Nixon administration expanded the definition of refugees, aligning U.S. policy more closely with international standards and responding to global humanitarian needs. During the Reagan administration, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 was enacted, which provided amnesty to approximately 2.7 million undocumented immigrants who met specific criteria while also introducing measures to prevent future illegal immigration.

The George W. Bush administration reshaped immigration policy in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks created the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and introduced the U.S. Patriot Act. These changes aimed to enhance national security by tightening border controls and increasing scrutiny of visa applicants from countries considered to be high-risk.

The Obama administration addressed immigration through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, known as (DACA) program, launched in 2012, which provided temporary protection from deportation and work authorization to undocumented immigrants who were brought to the U.S. as children.

The Trump administration implemented a distinct approach to immigration, focusing on restriction and enforcement. One of the administration's significant actions was the Travel Ban, which restricted entry to the U.S. from several countries, many of which were predominantly Muslim. The administration also initiated the construction of additional barriers along the U.S.-Mexico border, aiming to strengthen border security. Under the Trump administration, the "zero tolerance" policy toward illegal immigration was introduced, resulting in the separation of families.

The Biden administration proposed the U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021, seeking to provide a pathway to citizenship for approximately 11 million undocumented immigrants, expand refugee admissions, and create new legal immigration channels. However, the legislation has faced stark opposition in Congress and has yet to be enacted. The Migration Protection Protocols were suspended, which required asylum seekers to remain in Mexico while their claims were processed; implementing these changes has faced legal challenges.

The Final Word: Empathy and Humanity Towards Immigration

In conclusion, American immigration is a testament to the resilience, courage, and spirit of those who have journeyed here. It is a story of hope and struggle, diversity and unity, change and continuity. As we look to the future, it is crucial to remember this legacy and to strive for policies that uphold the ideals of freedom, opportunity, and justice that have drawn so many to these shores.

Empathy and humanity should be at the heart of these efforts. Empathy allows us to understand and share the feelings of others and to see the world from their perspective. It reminds us that behind every immigration statistic is a human with dreams, hopes, and fears. Humanity, however, reminds us of our shared human condition and the universal rights and dignity everyone deserves.

By weaving empathy and humanity into our immigration policies, we can foster a more compassionate and inclusive society. We can ensure that our policies are not merely about numbers and quotas but about individuals and their narratives. This approach pays tribute to the legacy of those who have journeyed before us and guarantees a vibrant and inclusive future for all.



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US Immigration Estimates 1965-Present

United States Estimates of Immigrants Admitted	
Period	Immigrants Admitted
1965-1975	~300,000 - 500,000
1976-1985	~450,000 - 600,000
1986-1995	~600,000 - 700,000+
1996-2005	~700,000 - 1,000,000+
2006-2015	~1,000,000 - 1,200,000+
2016-2019	~1,000,000 - 1,100,000
2020	~300,000 - 500,000 (COVID-19)
2021-Present	~900,000 - 1,050,000

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