

Volume 2

# Teaching With



# Documents

Using Primary Sources From the National Archives

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and

National Council for the Social Studies

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# *Immigration Patterns, Public Opinion, and Government Policy*

Immigration to the United States increased at a phenomenal rate during the early years of the 20th century. Between 1900 and 1915 the number of new immigrants entering the United States exceeded one million. These new immigrants came mainly from the southern and eastern European countries of Italy, Russia, Poland, Austria-Hungary, and the Balkans (see first featured document). For example, in 1914, one of the heaviest years of immigration, 73 percent of all immigrants came from southern and eastern European countries, while only 13.4 percent came from northern and western Europe.

Many native-born descendants of immigrant groups and many established ethnic communities resented the languages, customs, and religious preferences of the new immigrants and feared competition from them in the workplace. As a result, many individuals and groups urged their Congressional representatives to support more stringent legislation on immigration and amend old immigration laws (see second featured document). Not all citizens, however, were implacable toward the immigrants. Government officials and industrialists were well aware of the substantial role immigrants played in the American economy. More enlightened individuals were aware of scientific, religious, and civic contributions of immigrants and believed continued immigration was essential to the nation's well-being (see the third featured document).

Nevertheless, in response to increasing numbers of immigrants and domestic resistance to unrestricted immigration, Congress enacted two major laws in the 1920s to limit the number of immigrants

entering the United States. Each immigration bill established an annual ceiling for all nationalities and created a system for calculating the number of each nationality to be granted entry.

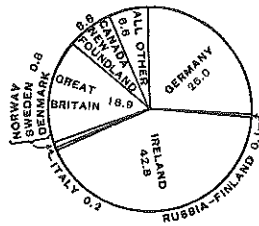
In 1920 Congress declared the 1910 census as the basis for determining how many immigrants from each country would be allowed to enter the United States. Congress also set a limit on the number of persons who might enter the United States from a given country at no more than three percent of the number of immigrants from that country already recorded by the census takers.

In 1924 Congress passed an even more restrictive act known as the Johnson Bill, named after Congressman Albert Johnson of Washington, chairman of the House Committee on Immigration. The Immigration Act of 1924 established the 1890 census as the new base for determining how many immigrants would be admitted to the United States. This effectively reduced the percentage admitted for each nationality to 2 percent. Since the foreign-born population of the United States was much smaller in 1890 than in 1910, immigration was more restricted than it would have been by a simple reduction of the base percentage. The 1924 act curtailed immigration from southern and eastern European countries since there had been fewer people from these countries living in the United States in 1890 than in 1910. By the end of the decade, Congress had further restricted those seeking entry into the United States.

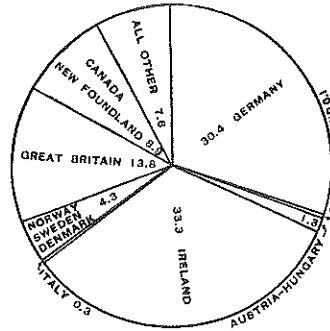
The pie charts in the first featured document show the distribution of foreign-born population

1. PER CENT DISTRIBUTION OF THE FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION BY PRINCIPAL COUNTRIES OF BIRTH: 1850, 1870, 1890, AND 1910

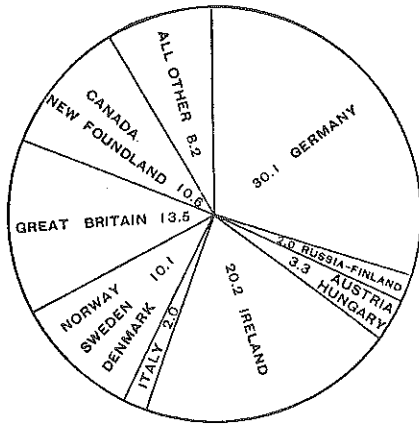
TOTAL FOREIGN BORN, 1850: 2,244,602



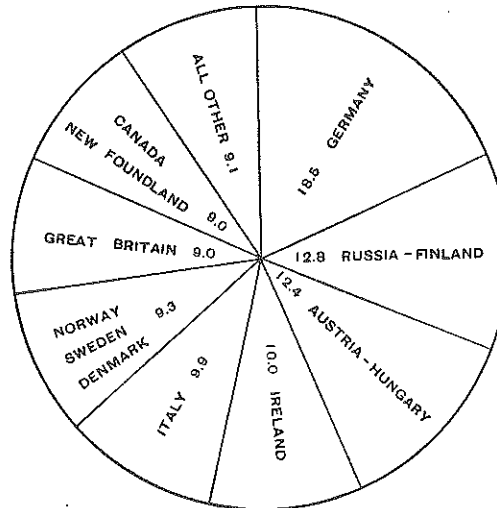
TOTAL FOREIGN BORN, 1870: 5,567,229



TOTAL FOREIGN BORN, 1890: 9,249,560

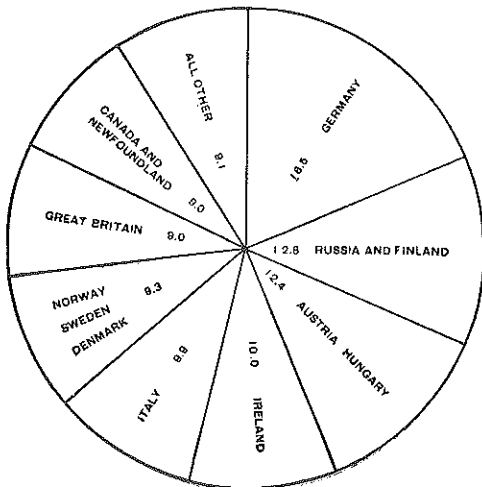


TOTAL FOREIGN BORN, 1910: 13,515,886

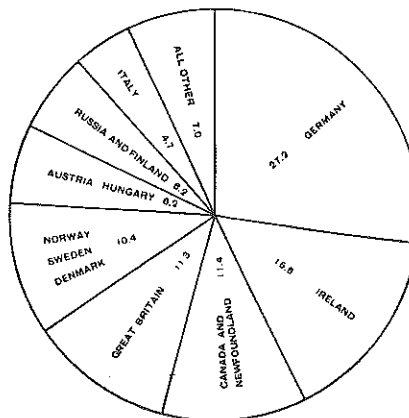


2. PER CENT DISTRIBUTION OF THE FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION BY PRINCIPAL COUNTRIES OF BIRTH: 1910 AND 1900

TOTAL FOREIGN BORN, 1910: 13,515,886



TOTAL FOREIGN BORN, 1900: 10,341,276



and are based on statistics gathered in the 1910 census, upon which the 1920 immigration quota was based. It is Plate 212 from *Statistical Atlas of the United States, 1910*, Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. The second document, from letters to Congressman Allen F. Cooper, shows the degree of organization of anti-immigration lobbying on the eve of World War I. They are found in the Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, Record Group 233. The third document is a newspaper report about Commissioner of Immigration Frederick A. Wallis's speech to the University Club in which he criticized the criteria for selecting immigrants. The article was clipped from the March 23, 1921, *Standard Union*, and collected by the Public Health Service. It is located in the Records of the Public Health Service, Record Group 90.

## TEACHING ACTIVITIES

### A. Making Graphs

1. Conduct a poll to determine the ethnic background of students in your class. Ask for a show of hands as you name different ethnic groups. Designate two students to record the name of each ethnic group and the number of students who claim ancestry from that group. One student should keep track on the chalkboard, the other on paper. When you have finished listing the ethnic groups, ask students if any groups were missed and record any additions.
2. Duplicate and distribute to each student the list with the data on the ethnic profile of the class. Ask each student to create a pie, line, or bar graph showing the numerical distribution of ethnic groups by country for the class.
3. Duplicate and distribute document one and the worksheet to each student. When the students have completed the assignment, review their answers in class. Ask the students to compare and contrast the ethnic makeup of America in 1850, 1870, 1890, and 1910 with that of their class.

### B. Analyzing Documents

1. Divide the class into groups of three and provide each group with document two or three. Direct students to read the documents and record their answers to the following questions:
  - a. From what areas of the world are immigrants coming?
  - b. What adjectives are used to describe immigrants?
  - c. What is the opinion in this document concerning immigration to the United States?
  - d. What reasons are given in support of this opinion? Consider nationalistic, economic, and racially based arguments.
2. Review the questions for each document, calling on reporters from each group.
3. Discuss with the class the following questions:
  - a. Which complaints are repeated?
  - b. Are opinions in the documents supported with facts?
  - c. What attitudes do they reflect toward the new immigrants themselves?
  - d. Are there any similarities between the complaints against immigrants voiced in the early 20th century and those voiced today?
4. Ask the student groups to exchange documents and review them carefully as the groups consider how government policy is influenced by public opinion. Discuss the following questions:
  - a. What evidence is there in this document of the methods used by individuals to influence government policy?
  - b. What evidence is there in this document of an organized campaign to influence government policy?
  - c. What disadvantages would immigrants have in trying to influence public officials?
  - d. Did immigrants or the opponents of immigration prevail? Support your answer.

### C. Follow-up Activities

1. Play Neil Diamond's song "Coming to America." Ask students to comment on Diamond's theme of America as a haven for newcomers. Ask the question: Is Diamond's dream of America a myth or a reality? Explain.

Fayette City, Pa. July 24 1909.

Mr. Alless F. Cooper M. C.

DEAR SIR:-

This country has been called the land of the free and the asylum of the oppressed. So it has been, so it is now; but it is not and should not be allowed to continue to be the dumping ground for all paupers, illiterates, weak-minded, and criminals of all other lands. We talk of protection of home industries and home labor, yet home labor, either native born or naturalized, cannot be protected while the gates of our ports are open wide to the millions of Immigrants who are coming. Immigration should be regulated or we will soon be on a par with the wage scale and social and moral conditions of Southern Europe and the Oriental Countries. We ask you to do everything in your power to secure the enactment of a law to restrict Immigration. They have no family ties in this country. They do not respect christianity or moral life, or the public institutions of this country, but simply rob the native born Americans of a livelihood, and then go and spend their gain in their own native land.

I hope that God will help you to weigh this question in the balance is my prayer,

I REMAIN, YOURS TRULY,

Arthur Stinell

Fayette City, Pa. Aug 2 1909.

Mr. Alless F. Cooper M. C.

DEAR SIR:-

The strength of this country lies in the intelligence of its citizenship. The American people have for many years undertaken, at an annual expense of many millions of dollars, to see that every child in America receives some preparation in our public schools, for the duty of a citizen, and we insist that every person of foreign birth more than twelve years of age who desires to share the advantages of our country, ought to be required before he comes here, to make so much preparation for American citizenship as is involved in learning to read and write in his own language. The illiterates that are coming to this country will not elevate American citizenship but lower it, therefore we must stop them from coming. Think of the disregard for the Sabbath day in the cities by these aliens. Think of the crimes against women and children by men who cannot speak the English language, and the constantly increasing pollution of American customs, homes and morals by the throng of immigrants, and the many other alarming conditions, all brought about by unregulated immigration, which should arouse the people to action and Congress to protective and regulative legislation.

WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

Hoping you are of the same opinion,

I REMAIN, YOURS TRULY,

J. A. Matthews  
Donora Pa.

*Miss*

*Ellis Island*

"BROOKLYN STANDARD UNION"



ON: WEDNESDAY, MARCH 23, 1921.

BUREAU OF THE  
PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE

1921 MAR 25 AM 9 13

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## SAYS THE FOREIGNER IS NOT APPRECIATED

Immigration Not a Menace to  
Nation, Says Commis-  
sioner Wallis.

TALKS AT UNIVERSITY CLUB.

Thinks U. S. Agents Should  
Select Immigrants Abroad.

Commissioner of Immigration Frederick A. Wallis told the members and guests of the University Club, Lafayette avenue, last night that the solution of the immigration problem lay, not in such tests as the literary test, which he said was not worth a snap, but in the selection of the immigrant on the other side by American inspectors and the scientific distribution and sensible amalgamation of the new citizen on this side of the water.

"I have never thought of immigration as a national menace," the Commissioner said. "I believe the problem can best be met by scientific selection of the immigrant on the other side and the safe and sensible distribution here.

"We don't appreciate the foreigner—that's the trouble with us. We look upon him as a foreigner. Well, he is; we all are, no matter how far back we trace our blood, unless you happen to be an Indian.

"One thing the war has brought to us on Ellis Island is that we don't see much difference between the immigrant of to-day and the early immigrants whom we call Pilgrims. You look upon the incoming foreigner as a common mechanic, as a laborer, an artisan. Yet he has risen to the positions of preacher, doctor, officer, and even member of the Cabinet. The immigrant, if well selected, will bring to the country strong arms, a keen eye, balanced brain and an almost superhuman ability to work."

### What the Immigrant Does.

The immigrant, according to the Commissioner, contributes 85 per cent. of all labor in the meat-packing industries; nine-tenths in the cotton mills, nine-twentieths in the clothing, one-half in the shoes, one-half in the collars, four-fifths in the leather, one-half in the gloves, nine-twentieths in the refining of sugar and one-half in the tobacco and cigarette industries. "And yet they call the immigrant the 'great American problem!'"

"I believe in a certain kind of immigration. The immigrant is indispensable to our industries. However, we do not care for the foreigner who thinks his first task here is to get up on a soapbox or up in a public school and preach the overthrow of the Government."

Speaking on the Americanization of the newcomer to this country, he thought Americanization could no longer be "shoved and crammed down the throats of the foreigner any more than a preacher can shove religion down anyone's throat."

### The Way to Americanization.

"The way to Americanization is through patience, not pressure," he warned. "It must come by environment, by better home and living conditions. In this respect the first impression is an important one. Conditions at Ellis Island should be made as comfortable and pleasing as possible. For that reason we are trying to humanize the island; trying to put more sunlight there.

Commissioner Wallis surprised his audience when he informed them that there is a well-established stowaway system in operation from Greek and other Mediterranean ports to Liverpool, thence to America.

"I believe the medical examinations of to-day are farces," Commissioner Wallis continued. "The examination is superficial. Many pass through with governmental permission who are diseased inwardly with no ap-

*3/26 To Com. Genl Immigration RHE*

2. Ask students to write a letter to Congressman Allen F. Cooper giving reasons why he should oppose the Johnson Bill and severe restriction of immigration.
3. Ask students to make a time line of federal laws pertaining to immigration from 1850 to the present.

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