

One Hundred Years of Political Weaponization: How U.S. Political Parties Have Strategically Deployed Immigration Policy to Consolidate and Expand Political Power (1926-2026)

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FINDINGS

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF POLITICAL WEAPONIZATION: HOW U.S. POLITICAL PARTIES HAVE STRATEGICALLY DEPLOYED IMMIGRATION POLICY TO CONSOLIDATE AND EXPAND POLITICAL POWER (1926-2026)

This comprehensive analysis examines the strategic deployment of immigration policy and enforcement mechanisms by the Democratic and Republican parties across a century of American politics. Evidence demonstrates that immigration policy has functioned consistently as a tool for partisan advantage, with parties shifting positions not primarily based on ideological conviction but rather in response to labor coalition demands, ethnic voter targeting opportunities, and electoral calculations. The restrictive policies of the 1924-1965 era reflected Republican efforts to consolidate support among labor unions and nativist constituencies threatened by Southern and Eastern European immigration. The liberalization of 1965-1996 represented a calculated Democratic strategy to capture emerging Latino and Asian immigrant electorates despite public assurances that immigration would increase minimally. The enforcement-focused era of 1996-2026 saw both parties embrace expanding deportation infrastructure, detention capacity, and prosecutorial discretion, though with differential enforcement priorities reflecting their respective political bases. Throughout this century-long period, immigration enforcement infrastructure has been deliberately built, expanded, and selectively deployed to maximize partisan electoral advantage while maintaining sufficient plausible deniability to avoid accusations of explicitly weaponizing immigration policy.

The Restrictive Era (1924-1965): Building the Enforcement Infrastructure for Partisan Advantage

The Immigration Act of 1924, commonly known as the Johnson-Reed Act, represents the clearest historical example of immigration policy explicitly designed to advance partisan political objectives while consolidating support among a specific coalition of Republican-aligned constituencies.[1][2] The legislation was authored and championed by Republican Representative Albert Johnson of Washington and Senator David Reed of Pennsylvania, both of whom held explicit ideological commitments to racial hierarchy and ethnic preference.[1] The Act's architects explicitly sought to preserve what they termed American "homogeneity" through a national origins quota system that allocated immigration admissions based on the ethnic composition of the American population as of the 1890 Census—a decade chosen specifically because it preceded the major waves of Southern and Eastern European immigration.[1][2]

The numerical impact was starkly discriminatory and intentional. Under the 1921 Emergency Quota Act, which preceded the Johnson-Reed Act, Eastern and Southern European nations had received 41 percent of available quota admissions while Western and Northern European nations received only 45 percent.[1] The 1924 Act inverted this proportionality entirely, allocating 82 percent of quota admissions to Western and Northern European nations while reducing Eastern and Southern Europe's share to merely 11 percent.[1] The Act simultaneously excluded Asian immigration almost entirely, effectively serving Western-based xenophobic movements that had long viewed Asian laborers as economic threats and racial inferiors.[1] As political scientist and contemporary observer Senator Henry Cabot Lodge noted, the Act was conceived as a bulwark against "a stream of alien blood," language reflecting the era's explicit embrace of racial pseudoscience and eugenics ideology.[1]

The Republican coalition that supported the 1924 Act was specifically engineered to unite business interests

requiring labor control with cultural-conservative and nativist constituencies. The American Federation of Labor (AFL), though ideologically opposed to many Republican positions on workers' rights and collective bargaining, provided crucial support because the Act reduced competition from immigrant laborers willing to work for lower wages and in worse conditions.[13] Samuel Gompers, himself a Jewish immigrant from Britain and founder of the AFL, nonetheless advocated for restriction because he "opposed the cheap labor that immigration represented," and the AFL provided essential political legitimacy for what might otherwise have appeared as purely nativist bigotry.[1] This coalition-combining business interests in labor supply control with nativist cultural conservatism-became the template for how Republican immigration restrictionism would operate for decades: presenting immigration restrictions as economically rational wage-protection measures rather than ethnic discrimination, even as explicit ethnic preference remained the policy's core mechanism.

The enforcement architecture created by the 1924 Act was equally significant from a power-consolidation perspective. The Act authorized creation of the U.S. Border Patrol as an independent federal agency, giving the executive branch-whether Republican or Democratic-unprecedented power to selectively enforce immigration law.[1][32] The Border Patrol began operations in 1924 with 450 agents deployed along both U.S. land borders, a force that by 1930 had nearly doubled.[32] Critically, the Act established a "consular control system" requiring prospective immigrants to obtain visas from U.S. consulates abroad before attempting entry, shifting the primary enforcement mechanism from apprehension at borders to discretionary visa denial administered by executive branch officials with minimal judicial oversight.[1]

This enforcement infrastructure proved immediately valuable for political purposes beyond the explicit national origins quota system. Historical records document that immigration laws were "applied selectively to meet the demands of labor unions, denaturalize and deport political activists, and prosecute criminals." [1] The selective enforcement of immigration law against political dissidents became a tool for suppressing labor organizing, foreign-born anarchists, and suspected communists-particularly following the Palmer Raids of the 1920s and continuing through the subsequent decades.[1] By creating expansive executive discretion in enforcement, the 1924 Act gave administrations of both parties tools to target immigrant populations selectively based on political considerations rather than uniform legal application.

The Democratic Party during this restrictive era (1924-1965) occupied an unusual and internally contradictory position that would prove transitional toward its later liberalization strategy. While the party's leadership in Southern and Border states supported the restrictive national origins system as part of broader white-supremacist political consensus, the party's Northern urban constituencies included growing numbers of immigrants and their descendants who increasingly viewed national origins quotas as explicitly discriminatory.[5] The 1924 Act received limited but notable Democratic opposition, led by Representative Emanuel Celler of Brooklyn-a Jewish American whose vigorous dissent anticipated the party's later reversal.[1] Decades after the Act's passage, Celler pointed out the legislation's "startling discrimination against central, eastern and southern Europe." [1] Celler's early opposition was prescient because it identified a latent Democratic coalition advantage: if the party could eventually position itself as the defender of persecuted ethnic and racial minorities, it could capture the growing political power of immigrant communities and their descendants.

The McCarran-Walter Act of 1952, formally known as the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, represented a Republican effort to perpetuate the restrictive system against emerging challenges to national origins quotas.[25][28] The Act was championed by Senator Pat McCarran (D-Nevada) and Representative Francis E. Walter (D-Pennsylvania), both restrictionists, demonstrating that immigration restriction transcended simple partisan lines during this era-though the Republican Party remained the more consistently restrictionist party at the national level.[25] McCarran was an anti-communist ideologue who viewed

immigration policy through the lens of Cold War security concerns, explicitly framing the national origins quota system as necessary to protect against communist infiltration and "Jewish interests." [25] The Act retained the national origins quotas while modest reforms ostensibly liberalized some provisions, but the retention of racial preference in immigration law remained the Act's core feature despite President Harry Truman's veto (which Congress overrode by a two-thirds majority). [25][28]

The enforcement machinery expanded throughout this period. By 1952, annual enforcement actions (deportations and voluntary returns) had reached 727,000—a dramatic increase from 12,000 in 1942—demonstrating that the infrastructure authorized by the 1924 Act was being deployed with escalating intensity. [43] During the Eisenhower administration, enforcement reached new peaks, with Operation Wetback in 1954 representing a massive interior enforcement campaign targeting Mexican nationals that resulted in approximately 1.1 million enforcement actions in that year alone. [43] Operation Wetback, despite its repulsive nomenclature, demonstrated how enforcement infrastructure could be mobilized for politically convenient scapegoating of a particular national-origin group—in this case, Mexican nationals whose labor was actually desired by American agricultural interests but whose presence could be politically weaponized during periods of labor surplus.

The consistency across this entire 1924-1965 period was that immigration policy and enforcement served two integrated political functions: first, labor supply control benefiting business interests while rewarding union demands for reduced competition, and second, ethnic gatekeeping that preserved political power for constituencies favoring Western European immigration while excluding or minimizing immigration from groups viewed as politically and culturally threatening. The Republican Party emerged as the champion of this system because it could unite business interests, organized labor in certain sectors, and nativist cultural conservatives under the banner of "preserving American character"—language that coded for ethnic preference while providing economic rationalization.

The Liberalization Era (1965-1996): Democratic Strategic Repositioning and the Construction of a New Electoral Coalition

The Hart-Celler Immigration Act of 1965 represented a dramatic and consequential reversal in Democratic Party positioning on immigration, one that would fundamentally reshape American electoral coalitions over subsequent decades. [2][5] The Act was sponsored by Senator Philip Hart (D-Michigan) and Representative Emanuel Celler (D-New York)—notably, the same Celler who had dissented against the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act four decades earlier. [5] The legislation formally abolished the national origins quota system that had been the cornerstone of American immigration policy since the 1920s, eliminating explicit ethnic preference and creating a seven-category preference system based on family reunification and employment criteria rather than national origin. [5]

Understanding the political calculation behind the 1965 Hart-Celler Act requires examining the electoral and demographic context. President John F. Kennedy's 1960 campaign had explicitly targeted urban ethnic voters in Northern states where immigrants and their descendants were concentrated and where Democratic electoral fortunes were increasingly vulnerable. [2] Kennedy campaign strategists recognized that the national origins quota system—which explicitly discriminated against Southern and Eastern European immigrants and their descendants—was becoming a political liability with the growing bloc of Italian-American, Polish-American, and other Eastern European voters who now represented significant Democratic constituencies. [2] In a 1955 letter to fellow Senator Lyndon Johnson, Kennedy wrote plainly: "The Democratic Party must do something to fulfill its 1952 pledges concerning revision of the McCarran Act if it is to have any appeal in the large cities of the North in 1956." [2] This was not high-minded principle about racial equality; it was electoral calculation

about whether the Democratic Party could maintain Northern urban voting blocs increasingly alienated by an immigration system that explicitly disfavored their ancestors' national origins.

The legislative history of the 1965 Act further reveals the strategic nature of Democratic positioning. President Johnson made immigration reform a priority in 1965 after his overwhelming electoral victory in 1964, which had given him a heavily Democratic Congress and significant political capital.[2][5] However, Johnson administration officials initially proposed reserving 50 percent of immigrant visas for persons with needed skills-language suggesting a preference for immigration of educated, economically productive workers likely to be from developed nations.[2] This language reflected business and employer interests in skilled worker immigration.

Representative Michael A. Feighan (D-Ohio), chairman of the House Immigration Subcommittee and an apparent opponent of liberalization, then proposed what became a decisive amendment that dramatically altered the bill's ultimate impact.[2][5] Feighan insisted that family reunification be prioritized over employment-based immigration and that the preference system allocate 74 percent of immigrant visas to family-based categories, including siblings of U.S. citizens-resulting in the bill being colloquially dubbed "the Brothers and Sisters Act." [2] Feighan presented his proposal as a clever political maneuver to preserve ethnic composition: by making family reunification the dominant preference, he argued that the system would naturally continue existing immigration patterns because people already in the United States would be able to bring family members from their countries of origin.[2] In one of history's most consequential political ironies, Feighan's ostensibly conservative amendment designed to preserve existing ethnic composition actually set in motion what would become chain migration-where immigrants could gradually sponsor extended family networks-that would dramatically transform American immigration patterns and the nation's demographic composition.

The legislative voting patterns on Hart-Cellar reveal partial party division but also surprising bipartisan support, though for different constituencies. In the House, the bill passed with overwhelming bipartisan support: 320-70, with Democrats voting 202 yes to 60 no and Republicans voting 118 yes to 10 no.[5] In the Senate, the margin was 76-18, with 52 Democrats voting yes and 14 no, while 24 Republicans voted yes and only 3 voted no.[5] The most vigorous opposition came from Southern Democrats, a telling indication that Democratic support was concentrated in Northern constituencies while Southern Democrats-still representing the party's residual segregationist wing-voted against the measure.[5] A contemporary political science analysis demonstrates that congressional votes in favor of reform were strongly associated with district support for abolishing country-of-origin quotas, with anti-discrimination sentiment resonating with voters in districts that elected reform-supporting representatives.[7]

The explicitly stated rationale for the 1965 Act contained demonstrable falsehoods about its anticipated demographic impact that both Democratic and Republican supporters endorsed.[5] Senator Ted Kennedy stated during Senate floor debate: "Our cities will not be flooded with a million immigrants annually... the ethnic mix of this country will not be upset." [5] Representative Celler similarly assured skeptics that "the bill before you in no way significantly increases the basic numbers of immigrants to be permitted entry." [2] Both assurances proved spectacularly inaccurate. By 1980, most immigrants were coming from Latin America, Asia, and Africa-entirely different from the Western/Northern European predominance that had characterized the post-1924 era.[2] Annual immigration levels surged from the 300,000 average that prevailed in the 1960s to more than 7 million immigrants entering the country legally during the 1980s alone.[2]

The Hart-Cellar Act's ultimate impact-dramatically increasing immigration from Latin America, Asia, and Africa-served Democratic political interests in ways that Democratic strategists either did not anticipate or

deliberately obscured from public discussion. Latino immigration surged following the Act, particularly as the Western Hemisphere quota system that had previously restricted Latin American immigration was progressively dismantled.[13] By 1980, the ethnic composition of America had shifted decisively away from the Western European predominance of the pre-1965 era. These demographic changes would prove electorally advantageous to Democrats because Latino and Asian immigrants and their descendants, despite internal political diversity, have consistently voted Democratic in presidential elections by margins ranging from 55 percent to 72 percent over the decades.[22]

The Democratic coalition-building strategy around the 1965 Act thus reveals sophisticated political calculation: the party could position itself as the defender of civil rights and opponent of racial discrimination (aligning with the moral arc of the Civil Rights Movement) while simultaneously structuring immigration policy to increase immigration from groups that would eventually become Democratic constituencies. The party's explicit falsehoods about how dramatically the Act would increase immigration-and change its ethnic composition-suggest either remarkable political incompetence or deliberate obscuring of true policy intentions. Subsequent Democratic electoral strategy reveals the latter interpretation more persuasive: the party consistently positioned itself as defending "immigrant communities" (by which it meant increasingly Latino and Asian communities) in electoral campaigns, suggesting that the party understood Hart-Cellar would generate these demographic outcomes.

Throughout the 1965-1996 period, immigration enforcement patterns varied significantly by administration, reflecting partisan priorities and coalition demands.[27] The Nixon administration (1969-1974) expanded the Border Patrol workforce but maintained relatively modest enforcement intensity by subsequent standards.[32] The Ford administration (1974-1977) continued this pattern. The Carter administration proposed a crackdown on undocumented immigration and created the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy in 1979 to study and make recommendations on illegal immigration and immigration reform, signaling emerging bipartisan concern about undocumented immigration even as the legal immigration surge was continuing.[32]

Labor union positioning evolved dramatically during this period in ways that would subsequently prove consequential. The AFL and CIO merged in 1955, and this merger catalyzed the AFL contingent to liberalize its position toward legal immigration, no longer advocating the restrictive policies that had characterized its earlier decades.[13] However, as undocumented immigration began surging in the 1970s and 1980s-partly as a consequence of the Hart-Cellar Act's removal of Western Hemisphere quotas that had previously restricted Latin American immigration-labor unions became increasingly concerned about undocumented workers as economic competitors.[13] The AFL-CIO during the 1970s-1980s pursued arguments mirroring those it had made against legal immigration decades earlier: undocumented immigrants were willing to work for less money under worse conditions and would drag down wages for native workers and increase unemployment.[13] This labor position would become electorally significant because it aligned with working-class Democratic constituencies concerned about wage competition, even as the Democratic Party's national messaging increasingly emphasized support for immigrant communities.

The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), signed by Republican President Ronald Reagan, represented the first major legislative compromise attempting to address the emerging undocumented immigration surge while maintaining some recognition of immigrants already integrated into American life.[15][18] IRCA legalized approximately 3 million individuals-mostly of Hispanic descent-who had entered the country prior to January 1, 1982, providing them pathways to lawful permanent residence and eventual citizenship.[15][18] Simultaneously, IRCA made it illegal for employers to knowingly hire undocumented immigrants and established civil and criminal penalties for violations.[15] IRCA also authorized a 50 percent increase in Border Patrol personnel in fiscal years 1987 and 1988.[32] The legislation represented a political

compromise: employer sanctions addressed labor union and working-class concerns about wage competition, while the legalization component provided a humanitarian safety valve and recognized that mass deportation was neither feasible nor politically acceptable.

However, IRCA's enforcement mechanism-employer sanctions-proved largely ineffective because the legislation included an "affirmative protection" provision that expressly freed employers from duty to verify the validity of workers' records.[15] The legislation also required workers to submit Form I-9 demonstrating work eligibility, but employers faced minimal enforcement pressure and financial penalties were typically small relative to the cost savings from hiring undocumented workers at depressed wages.[15][18] Subsequent studies documented that IRCA resulted in some discrimination against workers appearing foreign and wage reductions for workers whose status was questioned, but did not substantially reduce undocumented immigration or labor market competition.[15]

California's 1994 Proposition 187, though a state-level initiative rather than federal policy, revealed how immigration enforcement could be weaponized for electoral advantage.[33][36] The "Save Our State" initiative, introduced by Republican Assemblyman Dick Mountjoy and championed by Republican Governor Pete Wilson during his reelection campaign, proposed to establish a citizenship screening system and prohibit undocumented immigrants from using non-emergency healthcare and public education.[33][36] The initiative reflected white working-class and middle-class anxiety about immigration during a period of economic recession, with supporters arguing that undocumented immigrants were creating economic strain on state services.[33] The initiative passed with 59-41 voter support in November 1994, but was subsequently blocked by federal courts as violating equal protection guarantees under the Fourteenth Amendment and as intruding on federal immigration authority.[33][36]

Proposition 187's political significance lies in how it demonstrated a Republican strategy of weaponizing immigration anxiety for electoral gain while avoiding the explicit ethnic discrimination that had characterized pre-1965 policy. Rather than arguing for Western European preference as the 1924 Act had done, the 1990s Republican strategy framed opposition to undocumented immigration in terms of rule-of-law and fiscal burden-economically and legally rational arguments rather than ethnic preference-even though the practical effect was dramatically to curtail Latino immigration (given that Latin America had become the primary source of undocumented immigration following Hart-Cellar).

The 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), passed by a Republican Congress and signed by Democratic President Bill Clinton, represented the definitive shift toward an enforcement-first paradigm that would dominate subsequent decades.[3][6] IIRIRA strengthened U.S. immigration laws by expanding the list of criminal convictions triggering mandatory deportation, implementing mandatory detention for many immigrants pending removal proceedings, and creating a complex system of accelerated removal procedures.[3][6][26] The legislation authorized increased Border Patrol agents, enhanced document security, and promoted measures to facilitate legitimate traffic at ports of entry.[6] Critically, IIRIRA transformed immigration enforcement from a system primarily focused on criminal aliens and security threats into a system that could target virtually any removable noncitizen.[3][6]

The Clinton administration's support for IIRIRA reflected a complex political calculation. Clinton, facing reelection in 1996 against Republican Bob Dole, needed to demonstrate that he was not soft on immigration or border control-a vulnerability that had plagued Democratic candidates since the immigration surge of the 1980s.[10] By supporting IIRIRA's enforcement mechanisms, Clinton could claim credit for controlling the border while avoiding the accusation that he was anti-immigrant (a charge that might alienate growing Latino constituencies).[10] The bipartisan nature of IIRIRA made it politically difficult for Clinton to veto despite

some progressive opposition to its harsh provisions.

By the end of the 1965-1996 liberalization era, the political consequences of Hart-Cellar had become evident. Latino voter registration and participation were surging, particularly in states like California, Texas, and Florida where immigration from Latin America had concentrated.[19] Asian American immigration was also significant and growing.[5] Both groups, despite internal political diversity, showed emerging Democratic voting preferences.[22] Simultaneously, working-class white voters—who had historically been more Democratic and included substantial white ethnic communities—were shifting rightward on immigration and other cultural issues, sensing that the Democratic Party's coalition was transforming in ways that diminished their relative political influence.[20][23] The Republican "Southern Strategy," originally developed in the 1960s-1970s to capture white Southern voters alienated by civil rights progress, was being adapted to capture working-class white voters nationally, increasingly using immigration as a wedge issue alongside crime, welfare, and affirmative action.[20][23]

The Enforcement-Focused Era (1996-2026): Building a Bipartisan Deportation State and Selective Partisan Deployment

The 1996 IIRIRA inaugurated an enforcement-first paradigm that would dominate immigration policy for the next three decades, with both Democratic and Republican administrations expanding detention capacity, deportation authority, and prosecutorial discretion in selective ways reflecting their respective political coalitions.[26][27][30] The magnitude of enforcement infrastructure expansion is starkly visible in budgetary data: since 1994, when the Border Patrol budget was \$400 million, the annual budget has increased nearly 20-fold to over \$7.3 billion by fiscal year 2024.[56] Since the creation of the Department of Homeland Security in 2003, the federal government has spent an estimated \$409 billion on agencies carrying out immigration enforcement.[26][56]

However, the political parties deployed this enforcement infrastructure in strategically different ways reflecting their respective constituencies. The Republican Party, particularly from the 1990s forward, embraced enforcement-first rhetoric and policies appealing to working-class white voters concerned about undocumented immigration, Latino demographic growth, and cultural change. The Democratic Party, by contrast, attempted to maintain both its support among working-class constituencies concerned about labor competition and its emerging support among Latino and immigrant constituencies by supporting enforcement-focused legislation while attempting to exempt sympathetic immigrant categories from enforcement and defending certain immigrant communities rhetorically.

The George W. Bush administration (2001-2009) marked a significant inflection point where post-9/11 national security concerns became fused with immigration enforcement in ways that expanded both the legal authorities and practical deployment of enforcement mechanisms.[26][29][35] The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks created political space for massive expansion of immigration enforcement justified as counter-terrorism measure. The Patriot Act, passed nearly unanimously with the support of members from across the political spectrum (Senate 98-1, House 357-66), enhanced law enforcement surveillance authorities and immigration enforcement powers, authorizing mandatory detention for certain categories of aliens.[14][17] The 2002 decision to dissolve the Immigration and Naturalization Service and assign its functions to the newly created Department of Homeland Security fundamentally transformed immigration from a service-oriented function to a security-first function.[29]

Federal spending on immigration enforcement shifted dramatically after 9/11. By fiscal year 2006, the budget of immigration enforcement agencies within DHS was \$12.5 billion—nearly triple the fiscal year 2000 level

and 18 percent more than the \$10.6 billion appropriated that year for the federal government's principal criminal law enforcement agencies.[26] By fiscal year 2020, appropriations for immigration enforcement reached \$25.1 billion, nearly sixfold increase since fiscal year 2000 and 28 percent more than the \$19.5 billion directed to principal federal criminal law enforcement agencies.[26]

Congress authorized significant expansion of detention capacity during the Bush era and continued throughout subsequent administrations. The 2004 Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act required DHS to increase the number of available detention beds by 8,000 each year from fiscal years 2006 through 2010.[26] From fiscal years 2010 through 2012, congressional appropriations required ICE to maintain capacity to detain a minimum of 33,400 noncitizens, and from fiscal years 2013 through 2017, a minimum of 34,000.[26] This "detention bed mandate" created political and budgetary pressure on ICE to maintain high detention populations even when enforcement priorities might not have demanded such capacity, effectively incentivizing both arrests and detention to justify continued funding.[26]

The Secure Fence Act of 2006, signed by President George W. Bush, authorized a massive increase in border barriers and directed DHS to achieve "operational control" of the nearly 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexico border through a network of barriers and technology.[26] The Act required construction of 700 miles of primary border fencing, with 570 miles constructed between fiscal years 2006 and 2009.[26] This represented a decisive shift from the 1990s approach of concentrated enforcement in major urban border crossing areas to a more comprehensive barrier strategy attempting to prevent all unlawful entries. The fencing program cost tens of billions of dollars and represented a political commitment visible to voters-literally concrete walls-demonstrating action on the border.

The Bush administration also initiated Secure Communities in 2008, connecting local law enforcement databases with FBI and DHS databases to identify whether arrested individuals had immigration violations.[26] By January 2013, Secure Communities was in effect in all 3,181 law enforcement jurisdictions in the country, transforming state and local law enforcement into de facto immigration enforcement agents.[26] That fiscal year, individuals flagged to ICE through Secure Communities accounted for 59 percent of all removals of noncitizens arrested inside the country; the following year, it accounted for more than 67 percent of interior removals-demonstrating how infrastructure can be weaponized to dramatically expand enforcement reach.[26]

The Obama administration (2009-2017) occupied a more conflicted position regarding immigration enforcement than the Bush administration.[27][10][30] Obama campaign rhetoric in 2008 emphasized his commitment to comprehensive immigration reform and his desire to create a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants already in America.[10] However, once in office, the Obama administration inherited and perpetuated-and in key respects expanded-the enforcement infrastructure created by the Bush administration.[27][30]

The Obama administration's immigration enforcement record reveals a sophisticated political strategy of appearing reform-minded while actually dramatically expanding deportations and detention.[27][10] The administration achieved record high deportations of nearly 360,000 in fiscal year 2008-the final year of the Bush administration-and this rate continued and in some respects increased during Obama's tenure.[27] The administration's public justification for high deportations shifted focus from the Bush administration's counter-terrorism framing to a criminal-focused rationale, arguing that deportations should target immigrants with criminal convictions rather than ordinary status violators.[27][30] By 2016, the Obama administration reported that more than 90 percent of interior removals involved individuals convicted of serious crimes, a dramatic shift from the criminal conviction rate in earlier years.[27]

The Obama administration implemented this criminal-focused enforcement strategy through prosecutorial discretion memoranda directing ICE to prioritize removal of immigrants convicted of serious crimes over ordinary undocumented immigrants living and working peacefully in America.[27][30] The November 2014 prosecutorial discretion memorandum established three priority levels: Priority 1 included national security threats, immigrants apprehended immediately at the border, gang members, and immigrants convicted of felonies or aggravated felonies; Priority 2 included immigrants convicted of three or more misdemeanors or one serious misdemeanor, and recent unlawful entrants; Priority 3 included immigrants subject to final removal orders issued after January 1, 2014.[27][30] The Obama administration publicized these priorities as evidence of restraint and humanitarian concern, arguing that the administration was focusing on the "worst of the worst" rather than ordinary immigrants.[27]

However, this prosecutorial discretion strategy served important political functions for the Obama administration. First, it allowed the administration to achieve record-high deportations-which could be advertised to working-class white voters and those concerned about border control-while claiming that the deportations targeted only dangerous criminals, allowing the administration to maintain support among immigrant advocacy communities and Latino constituencies.[27][10] Second, the criminal-focused framing made deportations less visible and politically controversial because the targeted immigrants had criminal convictions; arguing against deporting a noncitizen convicted of drug trafficking or assault was politically difficult, whereas opposing deportation of a parent of U.S. citizens without a criminal record is more sympathetic.[27] Third, the prosecutorial discretion framework preserved the administration's ability to shift enforcement priorities if political conditions changed, allowing flexibility without changing underlying statute or regulation.

Yet this prosecutorial discretion strategy had profound effects on immigrant communities. By creating a large pool of removable undocumented immigrants, the Obama administration perpetuated the infrastructure enabling rapid deportation whenever political will shifted. The administration also expanded Secure Communities nationwide (after initially attempting to limit the program), ensuring that state and local law enforcement interactions would continue to be funneled to ICE for immigration consequences.[26]

The Obama administration's record on other enforcement mechanisms reveals additional complexity. The administration used detention extensively, with the daily detention population reaching an average of 50,000 by fiscal year 2019-significantly higher than the fiscal year 2000 level of 19,000.[26] The administration also continued and expanded border enforcement operations that had developed throughout the 1990s-2000s. Operation Gatekeeper, initiated in 1994 in the San Diego sector and employing stadium lighting, ground sensors, and infrared cameras to deter illegal entries, was replicated across other border sectors under both Republican and Democratic administrations.[35]

The Trump administration (2017-2021) represented a decisive break in rhetoric and some enforcement strategies while perpetuating underlying infrastructure created by previous administrations.[8][38][39][57] Trump campaigned on hardline immigration enforcement, promised to deport "millions" of undocumented immigrants, and pledged to construct a massive southern border wall funded by Mexico (a promise Mexico refused to cooperate with).[57][58] The Trump administration's family separation policy, implemented in 2018 under Attorney General Jeff Sessions's "zero tolerance" prosecution policy, separated approximately 5,500 children from their parents-a deliberately cruel enforcement mechanism designed to deter asylum seeking and illegal border crossing through infliction of family trauma.[39]

Trump also signed Executive Order 13769, commonly known as the "travel ban," prohibiting entry to citizens of seven predominantly Muslim-majority countries and suspending the entire U.S. Refugee Admissions

Program.[38][41] The Executive Order was justified as counter-terrorism measure but functionally served as a discriminatory measure against Muslim immigration, and Trump's own statements during his campaign explicitly calling for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslim immigration" made the order's intent apparent.[38][41]

The Trump administration also attempted to terminate the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program that had protected young undocumented immigrants brought to America as children from deportation.[40][37] Trump rescinded the 2012 DACA memorandum in September 2017, though federal courts blocked the termination and subsequent litigation preserved the program.[40]

However, the Trump administration's actual deportation record, while significant, did not reach the dramatic levels that Trump's rhetoric promised. The administration did dramatically increase interior deportations, particularly through expanded ICE street arrest authority, but Trump's stated goal of deporting 1 million people annually was not achieved. Part of this reflected operational constraints-immigration courts were already severely backlogged, making rapid deportation processing impossible-but it also reflected the fact that much of Trump's agenda required congressional action that was not forthcoming on some key priorities.

The Trump administration spent approximately \$15 billion on border barriers during its four years in office, fulfilling the administration's explicit campaign promise to construct a wall on the southern border.[56] The administration also dramatically increased detention capacity, with planning for massive detention camps to hold immigrants pending deportation.[57] The administration's enforcement priorities expanded beyond the criminal-focused priorities of the Obama administration to target essentially all removable noncitizens, with the administration indicating that anyone deemed deportable or inadmissible was a priority for removal.[30]

The Biden administration (2021-2025) inherited the massive enforcement infrastructure created over the preceding three decades and initially attempted to reorient enforcement priorities toward the most dangerous noncitizens.[11][30][47] On January 20, 2021, the Biden administration issued executive orders rescinding some Trump policies, including ending the travel ban, reaffirming DACA protections, and terminating Trump's national emergency declaration that had diverted military funds to border wall construction.[44][47] The administration endorsed the U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021, which would have provided pathways to citizenship for undocumented immigrants already in America.[44][47]

However, the Biden administration faced extraordinary pressures regarding immigration that constrained its ability to implement a purely reform-oriented agenda. Record numbers of asylum seekers and undocumented immigrants arrived at the southern border, with encounters at the border reaching unprecedented levels.[11][47] The administration's rhetoric about welcoming immigrants conflicted with the reality that the southern border was experiencing migration pressure at historically high levels, creating political vulnerability to Republican attacks that the administration was presiding over an "open border." [11][47]

The Biden administration responded to mounting political pressure with increasingly restrictive measures that undermined its own reform rhetoric. In June 2023, President Biden issued an emergency proclamation and rule barring most migrants arriving without authorization from applying for asylum, effectively capping asylum claims at approximately 1,450 CBP One appointments per day.[11] The following year, Biden announced additional asylum restrictions and accelerated removals through Title 8 expedited removal proceedings, attempting to compete with Trump on enforcement credentials while maintaining plausible deniability of anti-immigrant animus.[11][47]

The Biden administration's deportation record reveals the bipartisan consensus underlying the enforcement infrastructure. The administration deported approximately 591,000 people in its first three years, with the vast

majority of deportations occurring through returns-where migrants acknowledge unlawful entry but avoid formal removal orders.[11] Combined with Title 42 expulsions during the pandemic emergency order (which occurred mostly under Biden despite Trump initiating the pandemic order), the Biden administration's total repatriations exceeded 4.4 million, surpassing any single presidential term since the George W. Bush administration's second term (which achieved 5 million total repatriations).[11]

The election of 2024 revealed the political consequences of the Democratic Party's ambivalence on immigration and its failure to control the southern border sufficiently to maintain political credibility. Immigration emerged as the second most important issue for voters nationally (up from 3 percent in 2020), with 40 percent of voters nationally supporting deportation of undocumented immigrants (up from 30 percent in 2020).[53] In swing states far from the southern border like Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin, 80 percent of voters supported deporting undocumented immigrants.[53] Trump decisively won the 2024 presidential election, and immigration enforcement was identified as a key issue contributing to his victory.[53]

The Trump administration's second term (2025-present) represents a dramatic acceleration of enforcement in ways enabled by the infrastructure built over the preceding three decades.[8][60] Deportations following ICE arrests in the interior of the United States increased by 4.6 times between late 2024 and mid-2025, with ICE quadrupling the number of arrests resulting in detention.[8] ICE expanded street arrests dramatically, arresting vastly more people without criminal convictions, and the administration eliminated the possibility of release before final deportation decisions, with detention increasingly leading to removal.[8][60]

Coalition Building, Electoral Consequences, and the Pattern of Political Weaponization

Across the entire 1926-2026 period, immigration policy has served consistently as a tool for partisan coalition building and electoral advantage, though with different target constituencies in different eras. The restrictive era (1926-1965) saw Republicans consolidate support among labor unions concerned about wage competition, nativist constituencies fearful of cultural displacement, and business interests seeking to control labor supply. Democrats during this era, though sometimes opposing the most egregious racial discrimination, largely accepted the restrictionist consensus-with important exceptions like Emanuel Celler-because the party's Southern wing remained committed to white supremacy broadly conceived.

The liberalization era (1965-1996) saw the Democratic Party deliberately position itself as the party of civil rights and defender of immigrant communities, even as it obscured the true demographic implications of Hart-Cellar for electoral and political gain. By making family reunification the dominant preference in immigration admissions, Democrats ensured that immigration patterns would gradually shift toward nationalities with family members already in America-increasingly Latin American and Asian immigrants who would eventually become Democratic constituencies. The party's explicit false assurances that Hart-Cellar would not significantly increase immigration suggest that party leadership either profoundly misunderstood their own legislation or deliberately misrepresented it to maintain political viability while pursuing long-term demographic change.

Republicans during the liberalization era initially struggled to respond coherently to post-1965 immigration patterns and demographic change. The party's historical coalition-combining business interests and labor unions-fractured as labor's concerns about undocumented competition intensified while business interests increasingly demanded access to immigrant labor both documented and undocumented. By the 1980s-1990s, Republicans had developed a new coalition strategy around immigration restrictionism appealing to working-class white voters, Southern white voters, and culturally conservative constituencies concerned about

demographic change and cultural assimilation. This strategy intentionally avoided the explicit racial language of the pre-1965 era, instead framing opposition to undocumented immigration in terms of rule-of-law and fiscal burden-language that provided economic and legal justification for policies with profound ethnic selectivity.

The enforcement-focused era (1996-2026) has revealed profound bipartisan consensus on the desirability of massive immigration enforcement infrastructure, even as the parties have disagreed on prosecutorial priorities and rhetoric. Both Republicans and Democrats have supported dramatically expanded Border Patrol budgets, detention capacity, and deportation authority. Both parties have supported the construction of border barriers. Both parties have expanded Secure Communities and similar mechanisms funneling state and local law enforcement interactions to immigration enforcement. Both parties have deployed immigration enforcement infrastructure selectively in ways that advantage their respective constituencies.

The labor history of this period reveals how immigration has been used to manage class politics. The AFL-CIO, after the 1955 merger, liberalized its position on legal immigration while becoming increasingly hostile to undocumented immigration.[13][16] The party's positioning of itself as defending immigrant communities competed with working-class labor union demands for protection against undocumented competition. The Democratic Party attempted to navigate this tension by supporting enforcement-focused legislation (like IIRIRA and subsequent enforcement expansions) while rhetorically defending immigrant communities and eventually supporting pathways to citizenship. This strategy allowed the party to maintain working-class support among union members while building electoral strength among growing Latino and immigrant constituencies-at least until immigration became such a salient issue that both constituencies' concerns could not be simultaneously satisfied.

Electoral data reveals the consequences of this century-long pattern of immigration policy weaponization. The Hart-Cellar Act dramatically increased Latin American and Asian immigration, and these groups have consistently supported Democrats at higher rates than the general population.[22][24][45] However, the dramatic increase in undocumented immigration-partly a consequence of Hart-Cellar's removal of Western Hemisphere quotas-created competition concerns among working-class constituencies that had historically supported Democrats. By the 2024 election, significant defections were visible: Trump gained 13 points nationally among Hispanic voters compared to 2020 (losing by only 3 points rather than 28 points), and received 30 percent support among Black male immigrants compared to only 11 percent among native-born Black men.[21][24][45]

These electoral shifts reveal the long-term political consequences of how the Democratic Party used immigration policy for coalition building while inadequately addressing working-class concerns about wage competition. The Republican Party, by contrast, has maintained consistent working-class support on immigration issues, even as business interests continued to demand access to immigrant labor. The Republican ability to maintain this coalition reflects the party's explicit adoption of working-class interests on immigration-particularly after Trump's 2016 election demonstrated that hardline immigration restrictionism could mobilize electoral support-even at the cost of alienating business interests that had historically supported the party.

The most striking feature of the entire 1926-2026 period is how immigration enforcement infrastructure, once built, persists across administrations of both parties and becomes progressively more intensive and sophisticated. The Border Patrol created in 1924 expanded from 450 agents to 15,000 agents by 2007 to maintain at 20,000-25,000 agents in subsequent years.[32][56] The detention bed mandate created political pressure to maintain high detention populations regardless of enforcement priorities. The Secure Communities

program, though briefly paused by the Obama administration, was restarted under Trump and continues under Biden.[26][30] Each administration that promises to reverse the prior administration's enforcement approaches instead perpetuates or expands the underlying infrastructure.

This pattern suggests that immigration enforcement has become institutionalized in ways that transcend partisan politics, creating what might be termed a "bipartisan deportation state." [56][57] The massive bureaucratic apparatus created to enforce immigration law requires budgetary justification through continued enforcement activity; the detention beds must be filled; the Border Patrol agents must be deployed; the deportation infrastructure must process cases. Once this apparatus exists, it creates constituency support among law enforcement agencies whose budgets depend on immigration enforcement, defense contractors who profit from border technology, detention corporations that operate immigration detention facilities, and communities where Border Patrol offices and detention facilities provide employment.[56]

Yet within this bipartisan enforcement consensus, the parties have deployed enforcement selectively in ways reflecting their political objectives. The Obama administration's criminal-focused priorities allowed it to maintain Latino voter support while achieving record deportations. Trump's dramatic expansion of street arrests and detention allowed the administration to appeal to anti-immigration constituencies concerned about cultural change and undocumented immigration. The Biden administration's attempt to maintain enforcement infrastructure while supporting reform reflected political pressure from both directions-working-class voters demanding enforcement and Latino voters demanding pathways to citizenship.

Conclusion: The Century-Long Pattern and Contemporary Implications

The 100-year period from 1926 to 2026 demonstrates that immigration policy and enforcement have been weaponized consistently by American political parties to consolidate and expand political power. The restrictive era (1926-1965) saw Republicans build an enforcement infrastructure explicitly designed to maintain ethnic preference in immigration while consolidating support among labor unions and nativist constituencies. The liberalization era (1965-1996) saw Democrats deliberately reshape immigration patterns through Hart-Cellar to increase immigration from regions whose populations would eventually comprise Democratic constituencies, while simultaneously constructing a narrative of civil rights progress that masked the demographic engineering being undertaken. The enforcement-focused era (1996-2026) has witnessed both parties embrace an increasingly intensive and sophisticated deportation infrastructure even as they have deployed it selectively according to partisan interest.

This century-long pattern reveals that immigration policy has not evolved according to consistent ideological principle or humanitarian concern, but rather has been strategically deployed as a tool for managing class relations, consolidating ethnic and electoral coalitions, and expanding governmental power to monitor and regulate populations. The infrastructure built for immigration enforcement-the Border Patrol, detention facilities, Secure Communities linking state and local law enforcement to federal immigration authorities, prosecutorial discretion frameworks, border surveillance technology, and visa adjudication systems-has become embedded in American governance in ways that make reversal or constraint politically and bureaucratically difficult regardless of which party controls government.

The election of 2024 and the contemporary political moment reveal the limits of Democratic strategy around immigration. The party that built the Hart-Cellar system anticipated that immigration from Latin America and Asia would create a permanent Democratic majority. However, immigration-particularly undocumented immigration and the border's visibility in political discourse-has instead become a vulnerability that Democrat candidates struggle to defend. The party's inability or unwillingness to implement enforcement sufficient to

satisfy working-class constituencies while maintaining immigrant community support has resulted in electoral defection among both groups. Simultaneously, the Republican Party's adoption of hardline immigration restrictionism as a core identity issue has proven electorally successful in consolidating working-class white support and creating divisions within the Democratic coalition.

The year 2026 finds the United States with more intensive immigration enforcement capacity than at any prior point in its history, a bipartisan commitment to maintaining that enforcement apparatus despite dramatic expansion of its size and reach, and political pressure from both directions—those demanding less enforcement and those demanding more. The infrastructure built across 100 years of partisan maneuvering now exists as an autonomous force in American governance, suggesting that immigration enforcement will remain politically salient and administratively intensive regardless of which party controls government or what rhetorical commitments parties make during electoral campaigns.

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