

# The Detroit News

Thursday, May 23, 2024 | [detroitnews.com](http://detroitnews.com)

## Congress should learn from the 1924 Immigration Act

By ROY BECK

Exactly 100 years ago this May, Congress passed a bill that allowed millions of Black Americans to lift themselves out of poverty and to greatly increase their political power.

But the legislation had nothing to do with civil rights or social safety net programs, at least not directly. Instead, the bill in question sharply reduced annual immigration levels.

By reducing the former torrent of cheap foreign labor arriving on U.S. shores to a trickle, the Immigration Act of 1924 gave still-racist employers little choice but to recruit descendants of American slavery instead of waiting for the next wave of immigrants to arrive. Millions of Black southerners moved north in a “Great Migration” to higher-paying jobs and a chance to rack up greater household wealth.

Congress today has much to learn from the history of the 1924 Immigration Act. The law, and the decades that followed, show how tightening the labor market by restricting immigration can lift the fortunes of America’s most vulnerable workers.

Between 1880 and 1924, labor competition with immigrants had severely depressed economic opportunities for freedmen. The high levels of Ellis Island-era immigration gave northern industrialists the excuse they needed to avoid recruiting and hiring freed slaves and their descendants. Instead, employers encouraged steady streams of flotillas that provided them with Irish, German, Italian, and other desperate European workers.

Such blatant discrimination and its role in reducing bargaining power and pay for African Americans was all too clear to the nation’s Black publishers and other leaders.

“This country is suffering from immigrant indigestion,” wrote A. Philip Randolph, the great Black union leader, not long before passage of the 1924 immigration-reduction act. “It is time to call a halt on this grand rush for American gold, which over-floods the labor market, resulting in lowering the standard of living, race-riots, and general social degradation.”

Between 1897 and 1916, the House or Senate voted 12 times to restrict immigration,

but not always during the same Congress. And when passed at the same time, the bills still went nowhere, thanks to presidential vetoes that responded to intense lobbying by immigrant ethnic lobbies and industrialists preferring to pay lower wages in a slack labor market.

But lobbyists’ luck began to run out in 1917, when Congress overrode a veto of a minor restriction bill -- and in 1921, when President Harding signed a tougher one. But that wasn’t enough for Randolph and other

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Black leaders, many of whom urged a complete timeout on immigration. They got much of what they wanted when President Coolidge signed the 1924 legislation.

Immigration immediately plunged from 707,000 in 1924 to 294,000 in 1925. The number of new arrivals averaged less than 200,000 annually over the next 45 years.

As Warmth of Other Suns author Isabelle Wilkerson noted, Black southerners had long desired to leave the low pay and Black Codes of the South, but “the masses did not pour out of the South until they had something to go to.”

Now they did. Northern employers finally needed African American workers. As a result, roughly six million Black southerners moved to better jobs in other regions in what historians call the Great Migration.

All classes and ethnicities of American workers benefitted. But Black workers’ status soared nearly twice as fast once expanding industrial opportunities allowed them to prove their productivity. Between 1940 and 1980, for example, the real incomes of Black men rose four-fold. More than 70% of Black Americans were found to belong in the middle class by 1980, up from 22% in 1940. Combined, lower rates of migration and lower fertility caused

around one-third of a great reduction in U.S. inequality during those decades, according to economic historians Jeffrey G. Williamson and Peter H. Lindert.

No wonder W.E.B. DuBois observed, in the NAACP magazine *Crisis*, that the 1924 legislation’s “stopping...the importing of cheap White labor on any terms has been the economic salvation of American Black labor.”

That “economic salvation” could have arrived decades earlier, if Congress had simply ended mass immigration. Williamson and economist Timothy J. Hatton calculated that, without foreign immigration from 1890 to 1910, real wages for urban workers could’ve been 34% higher in 1910.

The 1924 law wasn’t perfect. Its system of national quotas favoring northern Europeans and fully excluding many countries on other continents came to be seen as at odds with the nation’s move toward a race-blind society.

The desire to correct this racial discrimination inspired Congress to pass new immigration legislation in 1965 that inadvertently re-started the mass immigration of today -- which none of the 1965 law’s sponsors said they intended. And now, a disproportionate percentage of the descendants of American slavery have suffered stagnation in real incomes -- or been driven from the labor market altogether -- after our own generation’s four-decade tide of historically high immigration.

The Immigration Act of 1924 fumbled on who should immigrate. But in deciding how many should, the law enabled descendants of American slavery to prove that -- despite racist domestic laws and social mores that still remained in place -- they could prosper in tight labor markets even faster than white workers.

Congress would do well to study this history before choosing immigration policy in 2024.

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