

Legislative History of Chain Migration

1924 -- Congress exempted spouses and unmarried adult children between 18-21 from per-country quotas. There were no categories for other relatives.

1952 -- Congress created chain categories for parents, adult children, and adult siblings in a limited number of countries. Highly-educated or skilled immigrants, however, received priority.

Average annual green cards issued 1952-1965: [265,520](#)

"Immigration during the decade 1951-1960 totaled 2,515,479, the highest since the 1920s." - [Congressional Research Service](#)

1965 -- Congress extended the chains to every country of the world and reversed the priority so that the chain categories had preference over skill categories.

Average annual green cards issued 1965-1990: [530,462](#)

1990 -- Congress raised the caps on chain categories.

Average annual green cards issued since 1990: [more than 1 million](#)

In Detail:

The 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act established a four-category selection system for countries in the Eastern Hemisphere (Northern and Western Europe were heavily favored). As in the past, the Western Hemisphere was not subject to numerical limitations. Per [P.L. 82-414, Approved June 27, 1952 \(66 Stat. 163\), section 203](#):

- 50 percent of each national quota went to "first preference" aliens determined by the Attorney General to be "needed urgently" due to high skills or education; plus the original immigrant's accompanying spouse and children.

- The remaining three preference categories were divided among specified relatives of U.S. citizens and permanent resident aliens.
 - The next 30 percent were made available to parents of U.S. citizens aged 21 or older.
 - The next 20 percent were made available to the spouses and children of lawful permanent residents.
 - Unused visas (capped at 25 percent per country) were made available to adult siblings and adult children of U.S. citizens.

"Although U.S. immigration policy incorporated family relationships as a basis for admitting immigrants as early as the 1920s, the promotion of family reunification found in current law originated with the passage of the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act (INA, P.L. 82-414). While the 1952 act largely retained the national origins quota system established in the Immigration Act of 1924, it also established a hierarchy of family-based preferences that continues to govern contemporary U.S. immigration policy today, including prioritizing spouses and minor children over other relatives and relatives of U.S. citizens over those of lawful permanent residents (LPRs)." - From "A Brief History of U.S. Immigration Policy" by Joyce Vialet, [Congressional Research Service](#), December 22, 1980

The 1957 Refugee-Escape Act added spouses and children who were "following" (as opposed to "accompanying") an original "first preference" immigrant. (See [DHS, Appendix I](#))

Immigration numbers soared during the 1950s, with more than half of all immigration coming from the Western Hemisphere which was not subject to numerical limitations.

"The gradual recognition that the national origins quota system was not functioning effectively as a means of regulating immigration was an important factor leading to the major policy revision which came in 1965." - [Congressional Research Service](#)

The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act made two significant [changes](#) that, in combination with the chain categories, doubled immigration over the next 25 years.

- **Revised the means by which immigration was regulated by replacing the national origin quotas with annual limits:**
 - 170,000 annual limit for the Eastern Hemisphere
 - 20,000 per country
 - 120,000 annual limit for the Western Hemisphere
 - 20,000 per country (added in [1976](#))
 - ([1978](#) amendments replaced the separate hemispheric limits with a 290,000 worldwide cap; 1980 legislation set the limit at 270,000 but no longer counted refugees under the cap)
- **Reversed the priority system for the Eastern Hemisphere so the chain categories gained preference over education and skills.**
 - Amendments in [1976](#) applied the preference system to the Western Hemisphere as well.

The **1990 Immigration Act** raised the annual [caps](#) on these **chain categories in bold** ([P.L. 101-649, Section 111](#)):

- unlimited for **parents of adult U.S. citizens**
- 23,400 for **unmarried adult children of citizens**
- 114,200 for spouses and minor children of legal permanent residents; and **unmarried adult children of LPRs** (with 77% reserved for spouses and minor children)
- 23,400 for **married children of citizens**
- 65,000 for **adult siblings of citizens** age 21 and over

- The Immigration Act of 1990 also called for a [bi-partisan commission](#) to "review and evaluate the impact of this Act and the amendments made by this Act" and to issue findings and recommendations on (among other things) the "impact of immigration...on labor needs, employment, and other economic and domestic conditions in the United States."

That commission, chaired by Barbara Jordan, recommended the elimination of the following Chain Migration categories.

- Adult, unmarried sons and daughters of U.S. citizens;
- Adult, married sons and daughters of U.S. citizens;
- Adult, unmarried sons and daughters of legal permanent residents, and;
- Siblings of U.S. citizens.