Teaching history from
DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

AAVEd
Asian American Voices for Education

High School Lesson Plan on
Changing Faces, Structural Realities—The 1965 Act and Georgia's Modern Population

Georgia Social Studies Standards

SSUSH21 Analyze U.S. international and domestic policies including their influences on technological advancements and social changes during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations

SSCG8 Demonstrate knowledge of the legislative branch of government.

The Pre-1965 Immigration System

Before 1965, U.S. immigration policy was shaped by the **Johnson-Reed Act of 1924**, which created a national-origins quota system designed to preserve a white, European demographic majority. Countries in Northern and Western Europe received large quotas, while Asian countries were limited to only 100 immigrants per country each year.



The system prioritized race over birthplace. For example, a person of Chinese descent living in Great Britain would still be counted under China's restrictive quota, reinforcing the idea that people of Asian ancestry were permanent outsiders. Although exclusion laws restricted Asian immigration, the government created exceptions for wealthy merchants, business owners, and students, showing that race-based restrictions could be selectively overlooked for economic and intellectual benefit.

The Push for Immigration Reform

By the 1960s, the quota system became a Cold War problem. The United States promoted democracy and freedom abroad while the Soviet Union used America's racist immigration laws as evidence of hypocrisy. At the same time, the Civil Rights Movement encouraged the Kennedy and Johnson administrations to challenge discriminatory policies at home.

The **Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (Hart-Celler Act)** ended the national-origins quota system. President Lyndon B. Johnson and many lawmakers did not expect it to dramatically change U.S. demographics. They believed the law's emphasis on family reunification would continue favoring European immigrants with established communities in the United States.

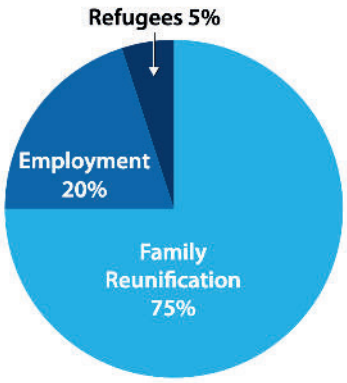


How the Law Changed Immigration

Although the executive branch pushed for reform, Congress shaped the final structure of the law through negotiations and compromises. The act created a seven-category preference system. Family reunification received the largest share of visas, but 20% were reserved for immigrants with specialized skills, advanced education, and professional expertise.

This skilled-worker preference aligned with Cold War priorities. Seeking scientists, engineers, doctors, and technology experts during a time of competition with the Soviet Union, the United States recruited highly educated immigrants, especially from Asia. This policy helped create the foundation for later skilled-worker programs, including the H-1B visa system.

Pie Chart of the Hart-Celler Act (1965), which set a 20,000-person cap per country.



The Model Minority Myth

The arrival and success of highly educated Asian immigrants contributed to the "model minority" myth - the stereotype that all Asian Americans are naturally successful, wealthy, and academically gifted.

However, this image was largely shaped by immigration policy. The system selected many highly educated professionals while limiting opportunities for refugees and other Asian immigrants who arrived without wealth, credentials, or support networks.

The myth hides major differences within Asian American communities and has often been used to argue that racism no longer affects minority groups. It overlooks the struggles of many Asian Americans and creates a false picture of a single, uniformly successful community. Understanding the history of immigration policy reveals that demographic change was not accidental - it was shaped by government decisions, economic needs, and global politics.

Complete Article and Lesson Plan

Photo Credit:
(Top to Bottom, Left to Right)

1. Yoichi Okamoto, Lyndon B. Johnson signs the 1965 Immigration And Nationality Act on Liberty Island, NY. Public Domain via LBJ Presidential Library
2. Kim, Esther June and Anna Falkner. "Handouts: Not Your Model Minority: An Inquiry on the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965" in Social Studies and the Young Learner (Jan/Feb 2022)

Contact us at info@aaved.org

History is the context of "**now**", "**why**", and "**how**".

Teach interwoven history.



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