

American employers during the making of the Immigration Act of 1924: Employer petitions to the US Congress and the US Department of Labor

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It is generally taken for granted that the 1920s were a period of prosperity for the United States, defined by the attainment of significant economic development. The main contributors to the booming industry were immigrants from Europe, who had worked as unskilled and semi-skilled laborers. However, the Immigration Act of 1924, which is considered a landmark in the history of US immigration policy, limited the number of immigrants in its primary aim of restricting Southern and Eastern European immigrants. It is said that many employers were opposed to restricting immigration in the 1920s as they were concerned about labor shortages.

This article clarifies the attitude of American employers at the time of the Immigration Act, analyzing the petitions and letters that employers sent to the US Congress and the US Department of Labor. Since the industrial world comprised the largest opponents of the proposed bill, American employers became highly engaged in fulfilling the immigration policy to the benefit of the American economy.

The analysis yielded the following results. The attitude toward the immigration act and the circumstances of the individual enterprises differed on the basis of the industry and the scale of the enterprise. Since employers struggled in the recession following World War I, with the attendant high unemployment, it was difficult to support the immigration bills on the grounds that they would result in labor shortages. As a result, their concern shifted to the process and the system of immigration selection because they needed to secure the thorough the supply of labor, not only in terms of quantity but also in terms of assured quality. The request from the business world to improve immigrant selection gradually drummed up support from influential congressmen and immigration officials, especially the then Secretary of the Department of Labor, James J. Davis. Eventually, the “consular control system,” which the employers had sought for years, was embodied in the Immigration Act of 1924.

It is well known that after World War II, US immigration policy actively accepted skilled human

resources as a growth strategy. As seen above, immigration policy before World War II also sought immigrants for the benefit of the US economy. Another important issue, therefore, is to understand the relationship between the immigration policies of the pre- and post-World War II periods.