

Anti-immigrant Political Movement

The phrase *anti-immigrant political movement*, sometimes called a *nativist political movement*, refers to both the groups of people who advocate for restrictionist public policies and the endeavors of these groups. Restrictionist public policies favor the interests of established citizens over those of documented and/or undocumented immigrants. Anti-immigrant political groups' endeavors typically include campaigning (public awareness and lobbying) that advocates restricting immigration and/or restricting the political rights of specific or nonspecific immigrant groups. Anti-immigrant political movements usually emerge in response to patterns of mass immigration but may also focus their endeavors on established immigrant communities.

Anti-immigrant political movements in the United States have had an extensive and ongoing history, despite the nation's reputation for providing refuge to the world's oppressed and impoverished masses. Each of the major periods of immigration to the United States has seen the rise of prominent anti-immigrant political movements, and the contemporary era is no exception. Some scholars, media, and activist groups occasionally refer to *the* anti-immigrant political movement as a singular movement; yet, history demonstrates that since the 1800s, these movements have taken many forms. The stated goals and manner in which these movements have framed their anti-immigrant rhetoric have often changed, as have the specific immigrant groups that these movements have targeted.

1800–1880

Between 1830 and 1860, large numbers of German and Irish immigrants, most of whom were Roman Catholics, arrived in America. Many established American Protestants contended that these Catholic immigrants threatened not only the Protestant religious hegemony, but also republican ideals of American government. The former contention stemmed in part from Catholic protests against overtly Protestant public school curricula. The latter contention was based on Protestants' beliefs that Catholics held allegiance to their priests and the Pope and would therefore eschew republicanism by voting in the interests of the Vatican rather than the American people. For many Protestants, these fears were compounded as large numbers of Irish immigrants asserted themselves politically through powerful organizations, or "political machines," such as New York City's influential Tammany Hall. Many Protestants met this perceived threat by forming anti-immigrant political groups that framed anti-Catholic rhetoric as pro-republican and, hence, pro-American. These groups attempted to restrict the flow of new immigrants and/or diminish settled immigrants' political power through

stricter naturalization laws. Such groups included the Sons of America, the Order of United American Mechanics, and the American Brotherhood. Though the aforementioned groups garnered substantial support during this period of time, none achieved a level of national prominence commensurate with that of the Know-Nothings.

KNOW-NOTHINGS (1852–1860)

In 1850, New York City political activist Charles B. Allen formed a nativist secret society called the Order of the Star Spangled Banner (OSSB). The society hoped to diminish newly arrived immigrants' political power by petitioning lawmakers to increase the length of residency required for obtaining American citizenship. OSSB also sought to diminish the political power of established immigrants by advocating for policy that prohibited foreign-born people from voting or holding public office. Between 1853 and 1854, the society spurred a secretive, yet large-scale, anti-immigrant political movement, with the number of members increasing from 50,000 to 1,000,000 (Anbinder 1992, 43). As the movement gained prominence in America, media began referring to its members as "Know-Nothings." The moniker's definitive origins remain unclear, but many historical accounts attribute it to the uniform response of "I know nothing" that members purportedly gave to inquisitive nonmembers who posed questions regarding the society.

By 1856, the Know-Nothings gained representation in state and local politics by helping to elect eight governors, over 100 members of Congress, the mayors of Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago, as well as thousands of local officials (Anbinder 1992, ix). The society also received endorsements from established politicians, most notably former U.S. president Millard Fillmore. But despite these electoral successes and political endorsements, the Know-Nothings failed to achieve substantive policy change at the state and local levels.

The Know-Nothing movement then expanded its focus to national politics by forming a political party known as the American Party. In 1856, the American Party established itself in the national political sphere by nominating Fillmore for U.S. president. But problems soon arose. As the election approached, the party split over the issue of slavery (party leaders abandoned neutrality and adopted a proslavery stance, which alienated many abolitionists in the American northeast). This split stalled the momentum that the Know-Nothing movement had built up over the previous six years and largely contributed to the American Party's tremendous defeat in that year's election. Fillmore finished third in the race, with the party carrying only the state of Maryland. The remaining members of the American Party, and hence the Know-Nothing movement, then disbanded, having achieved virtually none of the movement's stated goals.

1880–1920

During the 1880s, America saw a large influx of immigrants from the southern and eastern regions of Europe, and, by 1896, the numbers of incoming immigrants from these regions were greater than those from northern and western Europe. By this point in time, western European immigrants had established themselves politically and culturally in America, so most anti-immigrant sentiment of this era focused on the newcomers from southern and eastern Europe.

Concurrent with this period of American immigration was the rise of eugenics, a now disfavored pseudo-scientific field. Eugenacists maintained that certain races and ethnic groups were biologically inferior to others, and among these inferior groups were people from southern and eastern Europe. Many anti-immigrant political groups, including a revived Ku Klux Klan, then turned to eugenics and its underlying concept of biological inferiority in framing their anti-immigrant rhetoric. These groups asserted that due to inherent racial inferiority, southern and eastern European immigrants could not properly assimilate into American society and should therefore be restricted from immigrating. Three Boston-area scholars then promoted this eugenics-focused anti-immigrant political movement through a highly influential anti-immigrant political group known as the Immigration Restriction League (IRL).

IMMIGRATION RESTRICTION LEAGUE

The IRL was founded in 1894 by Prescott F. Hall, Robert DeCourcy Ward, and Charles Warren. The group disseminated pamphlets along with newspaper and journal articles focused on eugenics, which argued that southern and eastern immigrants were racially inferior to those from northern and western Europe. As a means of restricting these “undesirable immigrants,” the IRL proposed federal legislation requiring that mandatory literacy tests be administered to all newly arrived immigrants. In 1895, IRL member Henry Cabot Lodge, who served as a U.S. senator from Massachusetts, introduced a literacy test bill. The bill passed both chambers of Congress but was ultimately vetoed by President Grover Cleveland.

The IRL continued to lobby Congress for literacy test legislation until 1911, when the U.S. Immigration Commission recommended mandatory literacy tests for immigrants. At the behest of this commission, both chambers of Congress passed literacy test bills in 1913 and 1915, where these bills were vetoed by Presidents William Howard Taft and Woodrow Wilson, respectively. In 1917, Congress approved yet another literacy test bill as part of the Immigration Act of 1917. Wilson, once again, vetoed the bill, but Congress overrode his veto and it became law. Per the new law, immigrants (except for those from countries with special treaties or agreements with the United States, such as the Philippines) were required to

read a minimum of 30 words in any language in order to gain entry into the United States.

Not content with the immediate effects of the literacy tests on restricting immigration, the IRL then lobbied for numerical restrictions on immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. The IRL dissolved in 1921, following the death of Prescott F. Hall, yet the group's goals of instituting numerical quotas came to fruition with the Immigration Act of 1924. This act instituted quotas for new immigrants based on the 1890 U.S. census and limited the number of immigrants from outside the Western Hemisphere to approximately 150,000 per year (Reimers 1998, 21). This restrictionist legislation, which brought the influx of foreign-born immigrants to a near halt, was sustained until its reversal during the American civil rights era of the 1960s.

1965–2001

In 1965, there was a strong shift in U.S. immigration policy. That year, Congress, along with President Lyndon B. Johnson, enacted the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. Provisions within this act included replacing the National-Origins Formula quota system of 1924 with a revised system based on preferences. Under the new legislation, preference was given to immigrants on the basis of family reunification and “marketable skills” that immigrants possessed. The result was an almost immediate increase in immigration. Many anti-immigrant political groups opposed this legislation and sought to reverse it. Since eugenics became disfavored after World War II, these groups looked for new ways of framing their anti-immigrant rhetoric. Their answer came in 1968 when Stanford University Professor Paul Ehrlich published his bestselling book, *The Population Bomb*. The book's central thesis was that human overpopulation would ultimately lead to devastating environmental problems, including the depletion of the natural resources necessary to sustain human life. Ehrlich argued that to prevent this devastation, humans had to curb growing population trends. Ehrlich did not expressly mention immigration as a contributing factor to overpopulation, yet, nonetheless, many anti-immigrant political groups advocated tighter immigration restrictions as a means of curtailing the putative overpopulation of the United States. Examples of anti-immigrant political groups that grew out of this era of environmental framing included: Negative Population Growth, Carrying Capacity Network, Population Environment Balance, the American Immigration Control Foundation, and the long-lasting English Only Movement.

ENGLISH ONLY MOVEMENT

In 1968, Ehrlich cofounded the environmentalist group Zero Population Growth (ZPG). The group promoted population control, but did not specifically

cite immigration restriction as a means to achieving that goal. In 1977, ZPG's new president, John Tanton, petitioned ZPG's board members to adopt a restrictionist stance, but the board refused. Tanton then launched several of his own anti-immigrant political groups. In 1979, Tanton cofounded Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), an anti-immigrant political group that called for restricting the number of incoming immigrants. FAIR appealed to the public for support through direct-mailing campaigns and successfully effected restrictionist policy outcomes by lobbying at the local, state, and federal levels. In 1983, Tanton petitioned FAIR's board of directors to expand the organization's scope to include the issues of cultural division and bilingualism. The board denied Tanton's request, but assisted him in creating the restrictionist think tank, Center for Immigration Studies (CIS). In 1983, Tanton partnered with U.S. Senator Samuel Ichiye Hayakawa (R-CA) to launch U.S. Inc., an organization focused on issues of overpopulation, the environment, and immigration. The organization's initial project was the establishment of U.S. English, a public policy think tank devoted to increasing the salience of social problems related to bilingualism. U.S. English then launched the English Only Movement, which proposed legislation that sought to establish English as the official language of federal and state governments in the United States.

In 1996, U.S. English claimed responsibility for the U.S. House of Representatives' bipartisan passage of H.R. 123, "The Bill Emerson English Language Empowerment Act of 1996," which sought to declare English as the official language of the U.S. government. The Senate did not vote on the bill. In 2005, 2007, and 2011, U.S. Representative Steven King (R-IA), an affiliate of FAIR, introduced similar bills; these bills garnered 164, 153, and 122 cosponsors, respectively, but all three languished in the committee stages of the legislative process. Despite Congress's failure to establish English as the official national language, several states enacted their own laws, which made English the official language of these state governments. As of 2014, 31 states enacted laws establishing English as the official language for all functions and proceedings of state government.

2001–PRESENT

The attacks of September 11, 2001, led to increased attention toward American national security, specifically in the area of border protection. During that time, many anti-immigrant political groups began framing their anti-immigrant rhetoric by calling attention to America's lax borders; as evidence to support this claim, these groups cited the growing numbers of undocumented migrants who crossed into the United States from Mexico. The estimated number of undocumented migrants increased from 9.3 million in 2002 to 11.3 million in 2014, with a peak in 2007 of 12 million (Pew Research: Hispanic Trends Project 2013). Anti-immigrant

political groups then supplemented their border security awareness and lobbying campaigns with vigilantism in the form of organized civilian border watch operations, and these endeavors led to a widespread vigilante movement across the U.S.–Mexico border. This movement comprised groups such as American Border Patrol, Ranch Rescue, the Patriots’ Border Alliance, the Tombstone Militia, and the notorious Minuteman Project.

MINUTEMAN PROJECT

The Minuteman Project was founded in 2004 by former kindergarten teacher Chris Simcox and decorated Vietnam veteran Jim Gilchrist. In 2013, Simcox was arrested on two charges of child molestation, three counts of sexual conduct with a minor, and one count of furnishing obscene or harmful items to minors; as of 2015, Simcox awaited trial for these charges. In April 2005, Simcox and Gilchrist began patrolling the U.S.–Mexico border near Arizona, but split soon after to conduct separate border patrol operations in California, New Mexico, and Texas. Several Minuteman chapters then sprang up across the American Southwest. Some of these chapters were affiliated with Simcox and Gilchrist’s original chapter, while others remained autonomous.

Simcox then launched a project known as the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps, which focused on civil protest, demonstration, and political lobbying in support of a restrictionist policy. Over the course of the next decade, Minuteman Civil Defense Corps became affiliated with FAIR and Representative King, both of whom were influential in the House’s passing of a \$694 million border-strengthening bill in 2014, where the Senate did not take action on the bill. In July of that year, Minuteman Civil Defense Corps actively endorsed a nationwide protest called “National Day of Protesting against Immigration Reform, Amnesty and Border Surge.” This protest was staged by three additional anti-immigrant political groups: Americans for Legal Immigration PAC, Make Them Listen, and Overpasses for America. The protests drew significantly fewer supporters than anticipated, and, in some locations, such as Philadelphia, anti-immigrant protestors found themselves outnumbered by proimmigrant counterprotesters.

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See also: Militarization of the U.S.–Mexico Border; Politics of Comprehensive Immigration Reform; Racial Profiling and Anti-immigrant Laws

FURTHER READING

Anbinder, Tyler. 1992. *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s*. New York: Oxford University Press.