

Confronting Immigration Exclusion, 1860s–1920s



The exclusion of immigrants by the U.S. Congress is usually seen by historians as a dreadful aberration from the nation's remarkable history of open borders. But for Asian immigrants, exclusion was the rule rather than the exception. From 1882 to 1934, every immigrant group from Asia faced immigration restrictions that were more severe than those faced by European groups. The Immigration Act of 1924 offers a notorious example of this anti-Asian discrimination. While setting up national quotas that dramatically decreased the numbers of European immigrants, Congress virtually stopped Asian immigration by refusing to grant even a token quota to Asian nations.

Scholars have long debated the causes of Asian immigration exclusion. Historically, the question has turned on the relative significance of three variables: class, race, and politics. The class argument portrays Asian immigrants as tools of big business used to undermine the rising power of labor unions. Asian exclusion, from this perspective, is seen as a victory for the white American working class. The race argument, on the other hand, underscores the common class position of Asian and white workers and as a result attributes Asian exclusion to the race consciousness, and not the class consciousness, of the American labor movement. Finally, the politics argument recognizes the importance of both class and race but casts exclusion as fundamentally rooted in negotiations among elected officials and the workings of the American political system during moments when the call for Asian exclusion was loudest.

In addition, historians have opened up an entirely new dimension of the exclusion question by focusing on the victims of exclusion. Recent studies have begun to reveal the creativity, and limited success, of Asians in seeking to enter the United States. But more than this, it has become apparent that in resisting exclusion, Asian immigrants created legal precedents, changed administrative policy, and in various other ways affected the larger process of American immigration. This was particularly true for Chinese immigrants, the first national group excluded from immigrating to the United States and the longest to be denied entry within its borders.