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Huddled Masses, Muddled Laws: Why Contemporary Immigration Policy Fails to Reflect Public Opinion (History; 62)

Kenneth Lee

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In 1997 the United States accepted more legal immigrants than all other countries combined. This large influx of newcomers, however, has alarmed many Americans. Immigration is a controversial issue because it intersects with the most contentious issues of our time: multiculturalism, bilingualism, unemployment, crime, etc. Opinion polls since 1965 show that a strong majority want to reduce immigration. Yet our government has refused to respond to the public's wish. In 1996, Congress scuttled a proposal to reduce immigration by a third. (Earlier, in 1990, Congress voted to increase immigration by a whopping 40 percent.) This is all the more surprising because the United States has had no qualms about severely restricting immigration in the past.

Kenneth Lee explains why recent immigration policy has failed to reflect the public opinion by approaching the question from a broad, historical outlook, and from a focused, contemporary perspective. He traces several momentous historical changes that have abetted the pro-immigration block and weakened the restrictionists' clout (mainly, the rise of conservative economics in the 1970s and the growing racial liberalism in America). He also examines immigration policy on a micro-level: detailing the intense lobbying that went on for the 1990 and 1996 immigration bills, and he also shows how unlikely players as, for example, Christian Coalition's Ralph Reed, helped defeat the restrictionist bill in 1996.

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