

USA TODAY

Kennedy 'fashioned the modern day' immigration system

By Kathy Kiely, USA TODAY

August 26, 2009

WASHINGTON - Sen. Edward Kennedy's first major legislative victory helped change the face of the country and shaped his own political career.

In 1965, Kennedy had been in the Senate less than three years. His party's leaders gave him the job of pushing a bill to eliminate the quota system that had made it virtually impossible for anyone from anywhere but western Europe to immigrate to the USA.

Eliminating national quotas for immigration had been the goal of every U.S. president since [Harry Truman](#) - including Kennedy's brother [John F. Kennedy](#). That was probably one reason that "Ted seized the cause," in the words of his biographer, [Adam Clymer](#). Passage marked "the first of many times [Ted Kennedy](#) fulfilled an unfinished dream of one of his brothers," Clymer wrote.

It was also the first of many times that Kennedy found himself at the forefront of an issue of a cause that he came to see as a personal crusade.

"From the windows of my office in Boston I can see the Golden Stairs from Boston Harbor where all eight of my great-grandparents set foot on this great land for the first time," Kennedy told Senate colleagues in a 2007 speech. "That immigrant spirit of limitless possibility animates America even today."

Beginning with the 1965 bill, which opened the doors for the flood of Latin American and Asian immigrants who dramatically altered the nation's demography, to the end of his life, Kennedy remained the Senate's most impassioned advocate for widening opportunities for America's newcomers.

"He fashioned the modern-day legal system of immigration. He created humane refugee and asylum policies. And he has set the stage for a [21st century](#) solution to the problem of illegal immigration," said Frank Sharry, an immigrant rights advocate who worked with Kennedy on legislation.

Among the immigration measures that Kennedy helped shape:

A 1980 bill that established a system for refugee resettlement in the USA and nearly tripled the number of people who would qualify for admission.

A 1986 bill that granted amnesty to an estimated 2.7 million people living illegally in the USA and established penalties against employers who hired illegal immigrants.

A 1990 bill that revised the legal immigration system to allow for more immigrants and more high-skilled workers.

For all of his accomplishments, Sharry thinks Kennedy will be best known for the work he did with Sen. [John McCain](#), R-Ariz., on a bill that failed. The legislation would have put an estimated 12 million illegal immigrants on a path to citizenship and plugged holes in the employer sanctions system. It collapsed despite its powerful backers, including President Bush.

Sharry remains convinced that Kennedy "laid the groundwork" for a bill that eventually will pass. President [Obama](#) has made an immigration overhaul along the lines of the Kennedy-McCain bill one of his top legislative priorities.

On the day the bill failed in 2007, Kennedy himself predicted its backers would be vindicated. "We will be back and we will prevail," he said.