Immigration and Racial Change: Are All Generations On The Same Page?

A Survey of Attitudes toward Race, Immigration, and Ethnicity

Conducted by the Arthur Levitt Public Affairs Center at Hamilton College, Clinton New York

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Overview:

Data from the 2010 Census indicate that the United States is in the midst of profound demographic shift. A combination of factors—high levels of immigration, increasing rates of interracial marriage, and a growing willingness to embrace new and mixed racial and ethnic categories—has fundamentally altered the racial categories that were used to define American identities only a generation ago. Consequently, American attitudes and beliefs about race, ethnicity, and religion have become increasingly complex.

These demographic and attitudinal changes have had their greatest impact on young Americans. This age cohort is by far the most racially and ethnically diverse and a recent report found that a majority of babies born in the U.S. are among minority groups. In addition to increased exposure to racial and ethnic diversity, young people have also come of age after the racial controversies and conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s.

These generational changes have led some analysts to suggest a new divide in American politics in which racial and ethnic divisions overlay generational differences. On one side is an older generation of Americans, largely Anglo and White, increasingly concerned about America's cultural and demographic changes. On the other side is a younger generation identifies and is comfortable with this new and more diverse America. This "generational mismatch" between "gray and brown" underpins the increasing controversies over a range of issues including immigration, taxes, public education, health care, and Social Security. But does this generational mismatch actually exist? Do the attitudes of young Americans regarding race, ethnicity, and immigration differ in significant ways for older Americans?

To better understand these issues, the Levitt Public Affairs Center at Hamilton College sponsored a national survey of over 1,000 Americans, including 443 young people aged 18-29. This online survey was conducted by Knowledge Networks from March 12-March 21, 2011. Respondents include 941 individuals who took the survey in English and 66 respondents who took the survey in Spanish. Based on this sample, the margin of error for all respondents is approximately +/- 3%. The margin of error within the sample of young people is approximately =/- 4.6%.

Attitudes Toward Immigrants:

To better measure attitudes toward immigrants, we developed a series of four questions that measure different dimensions of perceived character of immigrants and their impact on American society. The questions were constructed to include both positive and negative descriptions of immigrants along each of these dimensions, and respondents were asked where they placed themselves in response to each pair of statements.


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Strongly Agree

Agree

Below are the percentage

Attitudes Toward Immigration Policy:

Respondents were presented with a number of conditions and asked if U.S. policy should make it easier, less easy, or no difference for immigrants with those conditions to enter the U.S. Across a range of conditions, young Americans were more likely to say that U.S. policy should make it easier for immigration.

% Saying Make It Easier for People With This Condition to	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Immigrate to the U.S.				
They come from a country that	45	34	33	26
has experienced a major natural				
disaster, like an earthquake or				
flood.	4.5	25	26	25
The come from country that is	45	35	36	35
experiencing a major war or				
genocide They come from a country ruled	38	34	33	33
by a brutal dictator	30	34	33	33
They come from a country	42	35	38	32
experiencing a terrible famine	72	33	30	32
They come from a country that	37	25	33	21
oppresses women	0.			
They are an unskilled laborer	9	5	1	1
They have AIDS	7	5	2	2
They are elderly	15	11	7	7
They can speak and write	44	39	31	34
English				
They come from a country that	21	13	10	9
oppresses gays and lesbians				
They come from a country with	32	19	21	21
extreme poverty				
They have an advanced	40	29	24	32
education.	4.4	2.5	22	2.5
They have specialized job skills	41	35	32	36
They have family members in	43	28	35	35
the US They some from the Middle Foot	8	6	0	3
They come from Western	8 12	6 11	0 5	<i>5</i>
They come from Western Europe	12	11	3	O
They come from Mexico or	12	12	1	3
Latin America	14	12	1	3
They come from Asia	9	8	1	5
They are wealthy	11	10	5	4
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The young American's attitudes toward immigrants from different parts of the world present the only exception to their tendency toward more liberal views on immigration policy.

Immigrant Voting:

One important facet of the generational mismatch thesis is the age skew in voting. Since immigrants are disproportionately young and not allowed to vote, this allows older Americans disproportionate influence in the voting booth. One possible remeb4 606y8175.2185 606.06cn

Illegal Immigrant Citizenship:

Respondents were asked whether they thought illegal immigrants should be able to become citizens under the same conditions as legal immigrants, whether illegal immigrants should have to meet special conditions, or whether they were opposed to illegal immigrants becoming citizens at all. On this question, young Americans did not differ significantly from other generations.

	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Yes (%)	64	71	79	85

As the table shows, young Americans are much more positive about the impact of these

Strongly/Somewhat Support 78 90 91 90 Church(%) Difference (%)

Conclusions:

While their opinions vary, young Americans display more tolerance for America's changing racial and ethnic character than do older generations of Americans. This evidence provides some support for the "generational mismatch" thesis. Still, it is important to note that on many of these issues the differences between generations is often small and never do you see large majorities of young people on one side of an issue with large majorities of older Americans on the other side. This suggests that while young Americans differ from older generations, they are not a monolithic block and their attitudes and interests are subject to change.