

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

A Survey of Attitudes toward Race, Immigration, and
Ethnicity

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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.¹ 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.² 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.

¹ http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/35793316/ns/us_news-life/

² <http://www.nationaljournal.com/magazine/the-gray-and-the-brown-the-generational-mismatch-20100724>

Strongly Agree	Agree		Agree		Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	
Immigrants are more likely to commit crimes.				Immigrants are more likely to follow the law	
Immigrants are more likely to contribute to the economy by working hard and starting businesses.				Immigrants are more likely to hurt the economy by driving down wages and taking jobs from people born in the United States.	
Immigrants are more likely to go on welfare and take advantage of public services.				Immigrants are more likely to pay taxes and be responsible for themselves and their families.	

The answers were then combined to construct an index of how positive or negative respondents' were to immigrants. This index ranges from 0 (most negative toward immigrants) to 12 (most positive toward immigrants). A 6 on this scale would represent a neutral position toward immigrants.

Overall, the average score on this index was 5.7, indicating that most Americans hold a neutral position towards immigrants with perhaps a slight tilt toward positive views. Broken down by age, young people were slightly more positive toward immigrants with a score of 5.8 compared to older Americans who scored 5.6.

Impact of Immigration:

To measure how respondents perceive the impact of immigration, the survey included the following two questions:

What kind of impact do you think that recent immigrants have had on your community?

What kind of impact do you think that recent immigrants have had on the United States?

Respondents could select a response ranging from very positive, somewhat positive, no impact, somewhat negative, or very negative.

Below are the percentage responses by age:

Impact of Immigrants on Your Community	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Somewhat/Very Positive (%)	28	25	14	18
No Impact (%)	41	36	43	29
Somewhat/Very Negative (%)	32	39	43	53

Impact of Immigrants on the United States:

	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Somewhat/Very Positive (%)	30	25	18	22
No Impact (%)	27	23	25	11
Somewhat/Very Negative (%)	42	53	58	68

For both questions, young Americans were significantly more positive of their assessment of the impact of immigrants than were older Americans.

Personal Impact of Immigration:

Respondents were also asked whether they “personally think immigrants threaten your job or economic well-being?” Contrary to their more positive assessment of the impact of immigrants on their community and on the nation, young Americans show no difference with older generations on this question:

Do Immigrants Threaten Your Job or Economic Well-Being?

	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Yes (%)	35	36	39	36

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 Immigrate to the U.S.	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
They come from a country that has experienced a major natural disaster, like an earthquake or flood.	45	34	33	26
The come from country that is experiencing a major war or genocide	45	35	36	35
They come from a country ruled by a brutal dictator	38	34	33	33
They come from a country experiencing a terrible famine	42	35	38	32
They come from a country that oppresses women	37	25	33	21
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 English	44	39	31	34
They come from a country that oppresses gays and lesbians	21	13	10	9
They come from a country with extreme poverty	32	19	21	21
They have an advanced education.	40	29	24	32
They have specialized job skills	41	35	32	36
They have family members in the US	43	28	35	35
They come from the Middle East	8	6	0	3
They come from Western Europe	12	11	5	6
They come from Mexico or Latin America	12	12	1	3
They come from Asia	9	8	1	5
They are wealthy	11	10	5	4

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 remedy for this is to allow legal immigrants to vote in local elections. To better gauge attitudes on this proposal, we asked the following:

Some people say that since legal immigrants pay taxes, they should be allowed to vote in local elections, such as for city council, mayor, or school board, so that they can have a say in the policies that affect them. Other people say that voting is a right that should be limited to U.S. citizens only.

Would you support or oppose allowing immigrants who are in the U.S. legally to vote in local elections, such as for city council, mayor, or school boards?

Surprisingly, a large majority of Americans (60%) supported such a reform, with the strongest support coming from young Americans and opposed only by a majority of those over 60.

	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Support Strongly/Somewhat. (%)	68	64	55	43

Attitudes Toward Illegal Immigration:

When asked whether the U.S. should focus more on integrating illegal immigrants into American society or should it do more to enforce laws against illegal immigration, young Americans were significantly more likely to favor a policy of integration:

	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Help Illegal Immigrants Integrate into American Society (%)	48	37	25	23

Similarly, young people were more likely to believe that the U.S. is spending too much on trying to stop illegal immigration:

	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Too Much (%)	24	18	13	9
Too Little (%)	50	56	64	70
Right Amount (%)	26	26	24	21

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+
Illegal immigrants should be able to become American citizens under the same conditions as legal immigrants. (%)	29	36	30	26
Illegal immigrants can become American citizens, but only if they meet certain conditions (%)	50	40	45	44
Illegal immigrants should never be allowed to become American citizens (%)	21	23	25	30

In a later question, we asked respondents if they thought that illegal immigrants who serve in the military should be allowed to become U.S. citizens. Contrary to the results of the previous question, all age groups were strongly supportive, even among those who had earlier stated that they thought illegal immigrants should never be allowed to become citizens.

Do you think illegal immigrants who have served in the U.S. military should be allowed to become citizens?

	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
All Yes (%)	80	73	79	81
Yes, but previously opposed illegal immigrant citizenship under any conditions (%)	50	41	55	55

English as the Official Language:

Young people were less likely than older Americans to believe that English should be the official language for the United States:

Do you believe that English should be made the official language of the United States, so that all government forms like driver's tests, election ballots, and tax forms would only be available in English?

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

Birthright Citizenship:

To better understand the recent controversy over birthright citizenship, the survey asked the following question:

Currently, the U.S. Constitution says that any person born in the United States is a citizen of this country. This means that children born in this country to illegal immigrant parents are automatically U.S. citizens. Would you support or oppose amending the Constitution so that only the children of U.S. citizens or legal immigrants would automatically become U.S. citizens?

On this question, young Americans were somewhat less likely to support amending the Constitution to end birthright citizenship.

	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Support Strongly/Somewhat (%)	59	68	70	86

Provisions of the Arizona Anti-Illegal Immigration Law:

Arizona recently passed a controversial anti-illegal immigration law, including a provision that requires people to prove to police officers that they are citizens or legal immigrants. On this issue, young people were less supportive than older Americans.

	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Support Strongly/Somewhat (%)	54	58	67	71

Optimism About the Future:

To assess respondents' opinions of America's ongoing racial and ethnic transformation, we asked the following question:

Data from the Census show that in 2010, most of the babies born in the U.S. were non-whites or minorities. As a result, as soon as 20 years from now, the majority of the U.S. population will be non-whites or members of current minority groups. What impact do you think this change will have on the United States?

	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Strongly/Somewhat Positive (%)	30	23	18	19
No Change (%)	42	41	37	34
Strongly/Somewhat Negative (%)	28	37	45	47

As the table shows, young Americans are much more positive about the impact of these demographic changes. In addition, these generational differences are not just the result of the greater racial and ethnic diversity of young Americans. Even among whites, young Americans are more likely to see these changes as positive.

Whites Only	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Strongly/Somewhat Positive (%)	18	9	11	12
No Change (%)	40	41	36	32
Strongly/Somewhat Negative (%)	42	50	53	57

Furthermore, young American's optimism about the future is not just limited to demographic change. Young Americans were also more optimistic than older generations when asked the following question:

What kind of standard of living do you think that your children (or the children of your generation) will be able to have?

	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Much/Somewhat Higher (%)	45	49	35	40
About the Same (%)	41	29	33	32
Much/Somewhat Lower (%)	14	22	32	28

Only 14 percent of young Americans believe that their children will have a lower standard of living than they have, compared to between 22 and 28 percent for older generations.

Attitudes toward Muslims:

The recent controversy over a Muslim cultural center and mosque near the site of the 9/11 attacks has highlighted the issue of attitudes towards Muslims. To better understand these issues, respondents were split into two groups. The first group was asked how they would feel about a plan to build a Muslim mosque in their neighborhood. For comparison, the second group was asked how they would feel about a plan to build a Christian church in their neighborhood. By using a split sample in this way, we can better isolate the impact of anti-Muslim attitudes compared to more neutral reasons for opposition (impact on traffic, parking, property values, etc.)

How would you feel about a plan to build a Muslim mosque in your neighborhood?

	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Strongly/Somewhat Support Mosque(%)	45	44	35	19

Strongly/Somewhat Support Church(%)	78	90	91	90
Difference (%)	-33	-46	-56	-71

Among all age groups, support for building a mosque was significantly less than for building a church. Nonetheless, the difference among young Americans was significantly lower than for other groups.

Attitudes Toward President Obama:

Barack Obama’s victory in the 2008 presidential election relied upon the strong support of young Americans. That support continues, as the following table shows:

Do you approve or disapprove of the way that President Obama is handling his job as President?

	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Strongly/Somewhat Approve (%)	60	46	51	40

Attitudes Toward Interracial Marriage

Young Americans show greater tolerance toward interracial marriage. Respondents were asked several questions about what makes for a successful marriage. As the table below shows, young Americans were less likely than older Americans to see the same racial background as important to a successful marriage.

What types of things are important for a successful marriage?

% Saying “Not Important at All”	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Same Racial or Ethnic Background (%)	58	54	45	27
Same Level of Education	35	37	24	26
Same Religion	29	25	26	22
Same Economic Class	46	47	33	32
Same Political Party	52	58	53	65
Same Age	50	54	54	58

Moreover, young Americans saw the same racial or ethnic background as the least important factor among those listed. Older generations, however, each saw one or more factors other than the same racial or ethnic background as the least unimportant.

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.