AMERICANS WARM UP TO IMMIGRATION

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Body

This nation of immigrants is rapidly learning to accept the newest arrivals in its midst, according to a new poll on ***Americans***' attitudes toward immigrants conducted for the Inquirer Washington Bureau.

For the first time since the early 1990s, when ***immigration*** became one of the most divisive issues in American politics, longtime ***Americans*** are as likely to think ***immigration*** is good for the country as to think it's bad.

The margin is so close that it's a statistical toss-***up***: 45 percent said ***immigration*** benefits the nation, 42 percent said it hurts, and 10 percent said its effects are mixed.

But the poll conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates shows a clear drop in anti-immigrant feeling since 1993, when three out of five ***Americans*** told Newsweek magazine that the influx of foreigners was bad for the country.

Frank Sharry, executive director of the National ***Immigration*** Forum, said the results confirmed his belief that anti-immigrant feeling peaked in the middle of the decade and now is on the wane.

"In the early '90s, we were in danger of losing our heads over this issue," said Sharry, whose group supports legal ***immigration***. "I don't think we're in danger of that anymore."

Opponents of current ***immigration*** policy said the survey results don't square with their view that most ***Americans*** want fewer immigrants allowed into the United States. The poll, which focused on respondents' experiences with recent immigrants, did not ask people to say how many immigrants should be admitted.

"Everybody knows some good immigrants, and that's fine; that's consistent with American tradition," said K.C. McAlpin of the Federation of ***Americans*** for ***Immigration*** Reform, which wants to cut legal ***immigration*** far below its current level of about one million per year.

"What you should ask is, 'Do you think that massive ***immigration*** continuing indefinitely into the future is a good or bad thing?' " McAlpin said.

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The nation is in the midst of the largest immigrant wave since the 1920s, when the census found that one in every seven U.S. residents was born in another country. Today that number is about one in 11. Unlike the Europeans who dominated earlier waves, today's immigrants are likely to come from Central and South America, Africa and Asia.

To find out how people feel about that, pollsters interviewed 1,314 ***Americans*** - black, white and Hispanic - defined for this survey as U.S. citizens or people who came here before 1980. They were asked to answer questions about more recent immigrants.

Interviews were conducted from May 2 through May 26. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3 percentage points for results based on the total sample. Results based on smaller subgroups are subject to a larger margin of sampling error.

The results suggest that most ***Americans*** understand that the makeup of the country is changing - and it doesn't bother them much.

Two-thirds said they are "not at all worried" or "only a little worried" by the surging numbers of Asians and Hispanics, or by the forecast that whites of European ancestry will eventually become a minority.

"It will be a whole different country, that's for sure," said Matthew Fox, 27, an audiovisual technician from Redondo Beach, Calif. "It will be the America it was meant to be. Whites have been in charge for too long - I say that even though I am a white male. I think America was meant to be diverse. It's a flag of many colors."

If there is a typical view that emerges from the poll results, it is one of clear-eyed acceptance of the new residents, knowing they bring both burdens and benefits.

The newcomers already seem thoroughly woven into the fabric of American life. Nearly all the longtime ***Americans*** said they encounter new immigrants in their everyday routines. The contact ranges from casual meetings in the grocery store to - less frequently - shared work and shared worship, close friendships and family ties.

Most said the newcomers hadn't affected the quality of their life one way or the other. A minority, ranging from one-tenth to one-third, said immigrants had improved local job opportunities, schools and culture.

By two-thirds or more, respondents said they weren't bothered by the differences in clothing, eating habits, religion and skin color that set many immigrants apart from the mainstream, with its emphasis on European ancestry and values. And by the same wide margins, they voiced approval for marriage between people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds.

It's hard to tell how deep these feelings go. Alick Grant, a 56-year-old native of Jamaica who moved here in 1978, thinks less tolerant views lie beneath the placid surface of his Bronx neighborhood.

"Everybody does get along," he said. "But if you're of the Cuban race, African race, Jamaican race or American race, you stick by your people. If you have a party, people will come out. It's not that they quarrel and fight. But they don't trust anybody but their own."

Most were aware of the currents of controversy swirling around the ***immigration*** issue. Half said the influx has caused problems for the country as a whole. But as they looked closer to home, those problems tended to fade.

Only a third said immigrants had created problems for their part of their state, and fewer than one in six said they had caused problems in their neighborhood.

"We're not exposed to it much around here," said Florence Marchant, 80, of Norwich, N.Y. "It's only what we know from the news."

There was widespread agreement that certain immigrant groups are portrayed negatively on television and in books and movies. And about two-thirds said there is a common belief that immigrants get too much help from the government and take jobs away from the native-born.

But many drew a sharp line between public attitudes and their own beliefs. For example, African ***Americans*** were the group most likely to cite fears that "immigrants take jobs away from ***Americans***." Four out of five blacks said such fears were a major reason why some ***Americans*** dislike immigrants. But only two out of five blacks believe those fears are warranted.

Two groups, those with less education and African ***Americans***, were most likely to say that present-day ***immigration*** is bad for the country. The young, the well-to-do, Hispanic ***Americans*** and those with the closest ties to immigrants were most likely to say it is good.

No single set of circumstances can explain these differences, but a few factors stand out.

Black ***Americans***, for example, said they encountered immigrants often - primarily in the marketplace. Most often, they said, the newcomers were working in local stores, restaurants and professional offices.

And blacks' concerns about immigrants seemed largely economic.

"When they come here, they get the work and the red-carpet treatment," said Thomas Grace, 32, a former bike messenger from Wilmington, Del. "And when you go to the government for something they say, 'Nope,' and turn you away."

Grace, who is African American, was once turned down for a bank loan to buy a neighborhood grocery store. It annoys him that there are Asian-owned grocery stores in his neighborhood.

People with less than a high school education were the only segment of those surveyed who said by a clear majority that ***immigration*** is bad for America.

The high school dropouts worried that immigrants were taking away their jobs. They were also most likely to worry about whites' loss of majority status and least likely to approve of marriages that crossed racial and ethnic lines. They reported less contact with new immigrants than any other group.

Such beliefs take root in the parched soil of poverty, and have very little to do with race, said Chicago social worker John Fitzgerald. The administrator of a storefront community center serving poor blacks in public housing and illegal immigrants in tenements, Fitzgerald said he is a daily witness to "people fighting over bones."

"There's a lot of miscommunication, a lot of mistrust, a lot of prejudice," he said. "It's understandable. These people are struggling for survival. . . ."

According to a recent study by the National Research Council, the wages of non-high school graduates have been hurt by immigrants, who tend to take jobs at the bottom of the economic ladder and keep these wages down. The council also found that immigrants have boosted wages for a majority of ***Americans***, including blacks with a high school education or more.

The benefits of ***immigration***, economic and otherwise, went unnoticed by all but a small minority of those polled. Republicans were more likely than Democrats to say the immigrant influx has benefited them personally - an interesting finding, given the 1996 Republican Congress' get-tough-on-immigrants policies.

Republicans were also slightly more likely than Democrats to say that ***immigration*** has improved the overall quality of life in their communities, along with the area's economy, schools and local politics. By contrast, they were slightly more likely than Democrats to worry about changes in the country's ethnic makeup and to say they felt uncomfortable around people whose clothing, religion or skin color was different from their own.

On the big questions, such as whether present-day ***immigration*** is good or bad for America, adherents of the two parties shared exactly the same views: 45 percent said it was good, 41 percent said it was bad, and the rest had mixed feelings.

By far the most accepting of new immigrants and society's changes were the wealthiest ***Americans*** polled - those earning more than $50,000 a year - and the youngest, between 18 and 29.

Well-to-do folks reported a lot of contact with immigrants. They hired immigrants to work in their houses, but they also sent their children to the same schools that immigrants attended, shopped in the same stores, and otherwise met the newcomers on a more-or-less equal footing.

The views of the young are a sign that attitudes toward immigrants, like other social views, are learned. Princeton Survey Research Associates' Larry Hugick, who conducted the poll, said these attitudes are formed in childhood and take their basic shape from parents' teachings, but they are also affected by individuals' experiences in the wider world.

Graphic

CHART

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