

Brianne Do
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Professor Levy
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Variation in Anti-Immigration Sentiment Among Americans

Introduction

Recently, President Trump used expletives to describe some Latin American and African nations but this was not the first time that he was open about anti-immigration; it was one of his greatest contributors to winning the presidency. This kind of sentiment is not new nor is it uncommon. Majority of his supporters seem to echo those sentiments. What stood out to me was not his insults but his appraisal of Norwegian immigrants encouraging them to immigrate. What explains variation in negativity towards immigrants? Some will claim that it is because immigrants (namely citing Mexican immigrants) take jobs away from Americans. It is important to realize when these kinds of biases appear in laws and policies. Other policy makers will make the same claims but their prejudices are more veiled so it can be difficult for them when voting for or against their policies. policy makers need to learn to serve the needs of all residing in the US even non-citizens as they, too, live in the US and so are inevitably part of our society. Voters, too, can be prejudiced in this way without realizing it which unknowingly harms themselves as well as others. This kind of knowledge allows for a more informed decision when voting because although it is government officials that make policies, it is the voters that have the final say on their implementation. Average citizens should also understand the false judgements they may have made based on stereotypes because it is this kind of prejudice that makes for an unstable

and volatile society. In this literature review, I will explore four different schools of thought that researchers have come up with in their efforts to answer this question.

Racial Prejudice

I am comparing immigrants from different countries so of course it follows that they are of different races. Immigrants of darker skin have been proven to experience more negativity from nativists as shown in a study by Mary Waters and Philip Kasinitz. This is supported by Mara Ostfield's study which studied the perspectives of nativists. She came to the same conclusion that "Afrocentric" features were looked upon less favorably (Ostfield, 22). Darker skin and Afrocentric features have a history of being associated with hard labor and slavery due to the skin being tanned and the dirt accumulated from working in outdoors. This is true not only in the U.S. but in Latin America and Europe as well. As a result, darker skin in a modern context has been associated with menial and unskilled labor which leads people to believe that people with these physical features are unfit to do tasks that require more intelligence. Many researchers have found evidence of the belief that immigrants are unintelligent. From this, Americans then conclude that if they are not intelligent, they are unable to learn English and integrate themselves into American culture and they will take low skill jobs from Americans that are said to be more worthy of it. Furthermore, there is a fear that because they believe immigrants are unwilling to learn American ways, this translates to laziness and lack of self-control so immigrants may turn to crime.

Culture Threat

Many researchers have a similar hypothesis that because immigrants are thought to be unable to assimilate into American culture, by showing Americans they are wrong in this assumption and by proving their intelligence through English proficiency they could come to be accepted by Americans. Ostfield's hypothesis was similar; she wanted to prove that Americans' exposure to assimilated immigrants would cause Americans reacted more positively towards immigrants (Ostfield, 35). The study proved her hypothesis to be true. Benjamin Newman's study builds on that further by proving that it is not only contact with assimilated immigrants that fosters positive feelings towards immigration as a whole, but also close contact with unassimilated immigrants as well. It is minimal contact with unassimilated immigrants that fosters negativity as it creates "a jarring and culturally disorienting experience" (Newman, 215). If they do not develop close relationships, that jarring and disorienting experience will be all they know and people have been known to fear what is different and unknown. Because they can distance themselves from immigrants, they can view those immigrants as something alien and "Other". Close contact, on the other hand, allows them to perceive immigrants as human like themselves even if they speak different languages.

It is easy for Americans to pick and choose what they see of immigrants when they do not see very much. They believe their way of life will be threatened by foreigners entering the country and assume that by entering an English-speaking country, the ability to learn English will come naturally but with close contact with unassimilated immigrants, they see that this is not the case. This shows that it is inability to view immigrants as equal in intelligence that causes this animosity.

External Factors

Many researchers have tried to pinpoint several environmental factors that contribute to negativity towards immigrants but no result has been conclusive. The factors most commonly cited are age, socioeconomic status (of which I will go into detail in the last section), influence from the government, political affiliation, and area of residence. Race is a factor that is expected to have an impact on attitudes towards immigration but not much info is available on this subject as most of the research focuses on the perspective of white Americans as it is assumed by most researchers that most natives are white and that they would harbor the strongest prejudices against immigrants.

Influence From Politics/Media

Emily Ryo's study tried to find if it was possible for the government's laws to affect Americans' view on immigrants. Her hypothesis had not been proven as she found that pro-immigration laws produced no change in opinion whereas anti-immigration laws fueled negative feelings towards immigrants showing that the public opinion does not follow the law, it is the law that reflects public opinion (Ryo, 128). We can assume that her message is that we need to change public opinion before we can change laws. This is a reasonable conclusion as laws can be made but it is up to the public to follow and reinforce them. Laws that introduced the abolition of segregation were introduced several times throughout history before they were accepted as part of society because the many that disagreed with the laws were prone to finding loopholes. Social movements took place and finally spread the word that convinced the public of its message. In a similar vein, research by Jessica Autumn Brown suggests that harmful prejudiced rhetoric against immigrants is popular among southern GOP candidates because it is

what their constituents have been known to respond to most as it fuels their displeasure that they do not know who to pin the blame for. She writes that racism is not as blatant as it was previously but it still exists and finds ways to remain integrated in our society (Brown, 38). This could mean that despite however many social changes that may occur in the future, racism will always continue to exist and evolve so it is something we must always be wary of. Researchers have come to the conclusion that influence from the government and media is distant and so it is more likely that the government and media are responding to public opinion rather than the other way around.

Age, Wealth, and Place of Residence

Justin Allen Berg's study showed that age, place of residence, and political party affiliation had an impact on his test subjects' opinions. Older, more right-leaning participants that resides in lower socioeconomic areas especially in the south were more likely to support anti-immigration (Berg, 44). The impact of age is a result of living in an earlier period of time in which today's social changes were not as widely accepted and so the elderly carry those ideals throughout their lives. For example, homosexuality was demonized twenty years ago but today different sexual orientations have been accepted as normal by most. Young people are also often more impressionable which makes them more accepting of new ideas. Place of residence often affects political affiliation, wealth, and exposure to immigrants (more detail on this is found in previous sections). Southerners and the wealthy tend to be more conservative and so they do not often welcome radical change which immigration is considered to be. Those living in places of low socioeconomic status often feel threatened by the presence of immigrants who they believe will take jobs that could have been theirs or that those immigrants living in their communities

will turn out to be criminals. People living in less diverse places will have little to no contact with immigrants which causes people to fill the gaps of what they do not know about immigrants on their own leading to false assumptions. One of any of these factors alone would not make too big of an impact but together they prove to be very powerful in shaping opinions.

Economic Threat

Within this school of thought there are those that explain that anti-immigrant sentiment is based on the socioeconomic status of the immigrants and those that say it stems from the socioeconomic status of the nativists that oppose immigration. As shown in previous sections, immigrants are believed to be unintelligent and so low socioeconomic status and lack of higher education seems to reinforce that assumption. Peter Burns and James Gimpel's study, however, favors the latter explanation that it is uneducated whites who are the most volatile towards immigrants. Scholars have found that this began in the mid 1800s when factories brought in cheap immigrant labor in competition with more expensive American labor. Hostility has also been known to increase during periods of economic recession (Burns, 103). A study by Robert Kunovich found the same results and adds that it is in jobs that employees are less likely to be educated that they are most likely to display anti-immigrant sentiment due to perceived job threat (Kunovich, 647). Those in low-skill jobs worry because to their employers, they are expendable; their work often requires a low level of skill as the name would suggest so they would be easily replaced by someone like an immigrant who might be desperate and willing to take any job in order to survive even if that meant lower wages. Employers will then see immigrants as a

cheaper alternative labor force and they may lack the ability to speak English so they will be less likely to complain about their conditions.

Although it is proven that economic tensions amplifies tensions between native-born Americans and immigrants, both studies conclude that anti-immigration sentiment does not stem from it.

Conclusion and Hypothesis

I believe that every factor listed has an impact on the way immigrants are viewed but it is exposure to immigrants, and by extension place of residence, that has the greatest impact. Continued exposure to immigrants will dispel any surface-level stereotypes about laziness and crime. It will also address more subconscious stereotypes about people with darker skin. Close relationships with immigrants will allow people to understand that immigrants do not choose to work low-skill jobs for less pay, they do it out of necessity. However, I am aware that most older people are not open-minded enough to accept that they are wrong in their long-held beliefs but it is still possible. This leads me to my hypothesis that young people who are prejudiced against immigrants can change their minds after close contact with an immigrant, whether that person is assimilated into American society or not, which will ultimately decrease support for anti-immigration overall. I would like to focus on young people because they are more susceptible to new ideas and they are the future of America so their opinion is what will truly shape tomorrow's political climate.

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