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Framing of Immigration: The discussion of immigration and its influence on the American identity

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Abstract

This paper delves into the contrasting perspectives and framing of immigration to sway public opinion. The paper highlights the dichotomy between those who embrace and welcome the evolving American identity and those who resist change in American communities and cultures.

Those who embrace change view immigrants as families, children, neighbors, and people seeking a better future. They believe in the elevating influence of immigrant cultures on American society. This perspective is supported by the recognition of the contributions immigrants have made to the nation's power and wealth. Acceptance is often reflected in policies that provide guidance for immigrants to stay and contribute to American society.

On the other hand, those who resist change often associate immigrants with negative stereotypes, such as criminals, aliens, drug dealers, and job stealers. Their goal is to maintain a highly homogeneous society in terms of race, national origin, and religion, which they perceive as the "true American identity." They strive to assimilate immigrants into a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant mold, fearing that any deviation will corrupt and harm American society. These resistants promote policies aimed at restricting immigration to protect the traditional American identity.

In summation, while both perspectives acknowledge the changing nature of American identity, they differ in their approach to this transformation. Understanding the nuanced dynamics of these viewpoints is essential in shaping inclusive and informed immigration policies in the United States.

A gang member or an immigrant looking for asylum? Is someone coming to steal a job from a native-born US citizen or someone looking for a better life? The corruption of the American identity or the spread of new cultures? The former option in each set of ideas on how immigration affects American communities and cultures tends to be the attitudes of those resistant to change. The latter overwhelmingly belongs to those who welcome change. The polarization on immigration is the perfect example of naive realism - how people can be exposed to the same facts but settle on different conclusions. Political scientists believe that in American society, "views of immigrants and immigration tend to fall along party lines" (Owens 2017). While this is mostly true, the parties also share many views. A more accurate model is a spectrum between those who resist and accept that the American identity is changing.

Individuals who resist change to the American identity have linked immigrants to words like criminal, alien, drug dealer, and job stealer; all these terms correlate to how the typical resistant views the impact immigration has on American society. Resistants tend to have the goal of "helping newcomers assimilate into [their] society" (Bush 2006). When it comes to American communities and culture, resistants want to maintain America as a "highly homogeneous society in terms of race, national origin, and religion," or what they believe is the true "American identity" (Huntington 2005). Their goal of "assimilating" immigrants is to convert them as close to white Anglo-Saxon Protestants as possible so they will not alter the American identity. They are forcing pieces from a different puzzle to fit in their self-proclaimed "superior" puzzle. Resistants were raised hearing that America is the best country; therefore, they believe that allowing citizens from other countries to come in without socialization will corrupt and harm American society.

This belief is seen in the types of policies they strive to enact. Resistant groups such as Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) believe "Immigration… threatens to subvert the soul and character of the United States" (Owens 2017). FAIR's purpose is to try and impede the immigration process to protect the traditional American identity. It comes as no surprise that "the FAIR network [has] close ties to Trump" and his administration, as many of his policies resemble the resistant goal of preventing immigration from affecting American communities and culture (Bush 2006). Trump exclaims he "will keep [their] communities safe" through his policies, including "immigrants [being] required to learn English and to pass a civics exam prior to admission" (Trump 2019). These comments infer that immigration makes American communities unsafe unless immigrants are socialized, a widespread belief among those who resist change. With all this said, resistants largely believe immigration harms American society; however, most embrace the immigrants who have taken all the legal steps to enter America. This accounts for the spectrum aspect, as many people do not stand at the extremes.

Conversely, those who accept and embrace the changing of American communities refer to immigrants as families, children, neighbors, and overall people looking for a better future; these words correlate to the policies they try to enact to embrace immigrant cultures. Those who embrace immigration see their beliefs come to fruition when analyzing multiple aspects of society and the developing American culture. When analyzing music in America, "Look at the pop charts at any given moment, and you'll detect global influences" (Mitchum 2016). Shifting our attention to the different cuisines in America, with "every immigrant culture [comes] new foods and new ways to cook it" (Mariani 2020). Music and food are two of humankind's simplest pleasures; one lifts the soul while the other warms the heart. However, it is not simply the music and food that makes people open to immigration, but instead, the bonds that form over the indulgence in music and food. Those who accept change recognize that every immigrant brings along their culture, and each culture provides its unique offering to expand the American identity.

Under the presidency of Barack Obama, an executive order was enacted that allowed immigrants who have "been in America for more than five years… to apply to stay in [the] country temporarily without fear of deportation" (Obama 2014). Compared to those who resist change and have the mission to remove illegal immigrants from America, this policy is considered more accepting as it provides illegal immigrants a path to stay. The more profound value influencing this policy is the knowledge that "America has been nurtured and enriched… by the contributions and sacrifices of so many people — almost all of whom were immigrants" (Biden 2021). Those who adopt an accepting and embracing point of view believe that allowing more cultures will expand the American identity for the better and finally fulfill the idea of America being the melting pot of diversity.

Furthermore, those who embrace immigration recognize the "indispensable role that immigrants have played in building American wealth and power" (Chua 2015). Without the help of immigrants, our industrial and agricultural industries would not be as established as they currently are. These industries understand how big of an asset and well-integrated immigrants are in American society and the beneficial impact they have and continue to have. While Chua does possess some resistant ideas—such as encouraging a policy to make English the "official national language"—she qualifies it with the stance that all people, including Americans, should learn other languages as well (Chua 2015). Thus still allowing immigrant culture to expand in US society. Most of those who accept the change are not saying to abandon the American identity and have open borders, but instead, stand in the gray area and embrace the change that has happened, yet generally do not support illegal immigration.

A prime example of the competing values of those who resist and embrace the change of the American identity is the town of Albertville. In using the town of Albertville as an example, resistants focused on how immigrants have "messy yards, too many people in one house, [and] too many cars" as it strays from what they are accustomed to – a neighborhood primarily of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (Our Town 2017). Whereas those with an accepting and embracing perspective, like Jeanie, were at first also critical of immigrants moving into town; however, once she socialized with them, she welcomed the change to American communities. Jeanie preached how Americans "[needed] to befriend [immigrants because] it's not going to be the all-white, sweet little community [they] used to be." (Our Town 2017). A person's effort to socialize with people of different backgrounds typically correlates directly to their acceptance of immigrants and if they accept or resist the change to the American identity.

In summation, the two perspectives on how immigration affects American communities and cultures come down to a spectrum of acceptance—from those who resist change in American communities and cultures unless there is heavy socialization to those who embrace change and welcome the expansion of the American identity. Overall, the two views on how immigration affects American communities and culture agree that it is changing; however, some of the population is resisting this change while others are embracing it.

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