Predictors of Immigration Attitudes among White Anglo/European College Students

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Abstract

The objective of the current study was to determine how various factors, such as religiosity, political affiliation, gender, marital status, and economic hardship influence negative attitudes towards immigration and immigrants. Eighty five white, Anglo-European college students were asked to complete a 19-item questionnaire that assessed immigration attitudes. Results indicate that, in general, participants held negative attitudes towards immigration. Measures of religiosity – more specifically, importance placed on religion and frequency of religious meeting attendance – affected immigration attitudes. Regarding political affiliation, Democrats held more favorable attitudes towards immigration and immigrants. Results also showed that those from reconstituted families held more negative attitudes towards immigrants than other family structures. Additionally, those who experienced economic hardship reported more negative attitudes than those who did not. Gender, however, did not contribute to attitudes towards immigration.

Background Info

Attitudes towards immigrants have changed negatively following the September 11 terrorist attacks (Hitlan et al., 2007). Negative attitudes toward immigrants have also been found among American elementary school children (Brown, 2011). Research has found that the more knowledgeable and diverse the demographic area, the more positive attitudes that white Americans have regarding immigrants (Berg, 2009). Additionally, theories attempting to explain negative attitudes toward immigrants have focused on religiosity (Greeley & Hout 2006; Green 2004; Kellstedt and Green 1993; Layman 2001; Leege et al. 2002; Morone 2003), family structure and ideology (Starks & Robinson, 2007; Wilcox, 2006), socioeconomic status (Greeley & Hout 2006: Norris & Inglehart 2006; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady 1996), and political affiliation (Brooks & Manza 1997; Hillygus & Shields 2005; Langer & Cohen 2005; Manza & Brooks 1997; Wilcox & Larson 2006; Woodberry & Smith 1998).

Additionally, previous research has also identified that white Anglo/Europeans are more likely to have negative attitudes toward immigration if they are Protestant (see Layman 2001), come from an intact home (see Wilcox, 2006), suffer from economic deprivation (see Norris & Inglehart, 2006), and claim affiliation with the Republican Party (e.g., Hillygus & Shields, 2005). However, little research has addressed how these factors interact to influence overall attitudes toward immigration. The current study aimed at determining how these factors work together to produce negative attitudes toward immigration.

Method

The current study examined the relationship between religiosity indices (e.g., religious affiliation, importance placed on religion, frequency of religious meeting attendance), political affiliation (e.g., Democrat, Republican, Independent, Other), gender, parents' marital status, and economic hardship while growing up on the immigration attitudes of 85 white, Anglo/European college students from a Midwestern University. Attitudes toward immigration were assessed with a 19-item questionnaire. The questionnaire contained such items as "Immigrants take jobs away from Americans who want them," "There are too many immigrants in the United States today," and "The wrong kinds of people are coming into this country." Participants rated all items on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 being *strongly disagree* and 5 being *strongly agree.* Higher scores indicated more negative attitudes toward immigration. A summation score was created to represent total attitudes toward immigration that was used in analysis. The reliability index for the scale was .78.

Data analyzed in the current study was derived from an online survey administered at a Midwestern public research university containing a primarily white student body with a recent increase in immigrant students. Participants included 15 males and 70 females ranging in age from 18 years to over 25. All participants were born in the United States, with parents also born in the United States, and spoke English as a first language. Missing data was handled by using the Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) method to estimate values for missing cases. The estimated values were then substituted for the missing cases, a process referred to as imputation, using the computer program Amelia (King, Honaker, Joseph, & Scheve, 2001). The new data set was used in analyses.

Results

Results indicated that on average, participants held negative attitudes toward immigration ($M = 55.2$, $SD = 8.3$, range 37-79). Descriptive statistics for specific attitudes toward immigrants can be found in table 1.

Linear regression was performed to determine the relationship between religiosity indices (e.g., religious affiliation, importance placed on religion, frequency of religious meeting attendance), political affiliation (e.g., Democrat, Republican, Independent, Other), gender, parents' marital status, and economic hardship while growing up on attitudes toward immigration. Measures of religiosity were found to contribute significantly to attitudes toward immigration. Specifically, importance placed on religion and frequency of religious meeting attendance, but not religious affiliation, contributed to immigration attitudes. Political affiliation was also found to contribute to immigration attitudes in that those who identified themselves as Democrat had more favorable attitudes toward immigration than all other political affiliations assessed. Family structure and economic hardship were also related to immigration attitudes in that those from reconstituted families held more negative attitudes toward immigration than those from continuously intact, never married, or divorced family structures. Participants who experienced more economic hardship while growing up reported more negative attitudes toward immigration than those who did not experience as much economic hardship. Gender was not found to contribute to attitudes toward immigration. Results can be found in table 2.

Table 1. *Attitudes toward Immigration*

Attitude	%
Immigrants are a burden to the country.	14.1
Immigrants take jobs away from Americans who want them.	28.3
The Federal Government is not tough enough on immigrants.	36.5
Immigrants are bad for the area or local community.	4.7
There are too many immigrants in the United States today.	35.3
The majority of immigrants who are in American are here illegally.	20.0
Immigrants should adopt American culture and values.	27.1
Too many people are coming into this country.	43.6
Tax payers have to pay too much to provide services to immigrants (schools, healthcare, welfare).	45.9
The wrong kinds of people are coming into this country.	9.4
Illegal immigration increases the likelihood of terrorism.	27.1
Illegal immigration is dangerous for legal immigration.	65.9
The United States government should spend more to prevent illegal immigrants from coming into this country.	41.1
Immigrants are more likely to commit crimes than anyone else.	9.5
Immigrants should learn English.	3.6
Immigrants are a burden to society.	64.7
Immigrants can strengthen America because of hard work and skills they may have.	64.7
Recent immigrants are unfairly discriminated against.	68.2
Immigrants pay their fair share of taxes.	30.6
Immigrants need to believe in God to be part of American society.	95.3

Discussion

The current study found that the more importance participants placed on their religion, the more positive attitudes they held regarding immigration, but with increased frequency of religious meeting attendance came a decreased acceptance of immigration. These results seem contradictory. This result may stem from the implication that as more importance is placed on religion, participants become increasingly more accepting of mankind, including those who are different from them. On the other hand, increased frequency of religious meeting attendance could be indicative of religious fanaticism, and these participants may be less tolerant of immigrants who may follow a different faith. Additionally, participants who were Democrats held more favorable attitudes toward immigration in comparison to other political parties, perhaps due to the more liberal views of the Democratic Party. The current study also found that participants who experienced economic hardship while growing up reported more negative attitudes toward immigrants than others. This may be due to a belief that immigrants feel entitled to the benefits of living in America or the thought that immigrants are "stealing jobs" or detrimentally affecting the economy. Interestingly, participants from reconstituted families reported more favorable attitudes toward immigrants than those from other family backgrounds. This may result from blended reconstituted families being more accepting of immigrants and the diverse nature of the country.

This study raises questions about why these factors influence attitudes toward immigration, and is limited in that participants could be biased, judgmental, or otherwise skewed the data in an attempt to not appear racist. However, this study also opens the door to a larger realm of research. The current study could be expanded in the future by attempting to determine exactly why or what aspects of these particular factors influence attitudes toward immigration. Another relationship that could be studied is that between personality and attitude toward immigration.

Table 2. *Regression Coefficients for Attitudes toward Immigration*

Outcome	Attitudes Toward
Predictors	Immigration
Protestant	5.05
Other religion	2.98
Religious frequency	-4.50*
Religious importance	3.33*
Democrat	-7.87***
Republican	1.67
Income	-3.03*
Divorced	1.96
Remarried	7.30**
Never married	7.13
Gender	-3.10
R^2	.40
F	2.81**

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$