

As Immigrants Tell It

By Lydia Saad

A new study of foreign-born adults living in the United States suggests that immigrants are firm believers in the American Dream and for the most part have received the opportunities needed to achieve it. Although many immigrants retain ties to their homelands through the people they socialize with and the language they speak at home, their commitment to the United States is clear: Immigrants want to remain in the US and most advocate the "melting pot" approach to immigration, with new arrivals encouraged to blend into the American culture.

My colleagues and I at the Gallup Organization conducted the survey from which these findings are taken for *USA Today* and CNN. Polling was done June 5-6, 1995, in English only. It therefore represents about three-quarters of the foreign-born population living in the United States. According to US Census Bureau estimates, about one-quarter of all immigrants are not proficient in English, and thus were not able to participate in this telephone survey.

Attractions... and Flaws

Several poll questions suggest that immigrants are unequivocal in their desire to remain in the US and are enthusiastic about being American. But when asked to compare the United States with their homeland as a place to raise children, some ambivalence about the American way of life is clearly evident. A bare majority (54%) prefer the United States while one-third say their homeland is the better place.

The vast majority of immigrants—over 80%—do prefer America to their homeland when it comes to the job opportunities available for themselves and their children, and most think the US superior in terms of legal justice. But the US fares quite poorly on crime and moral values; only one-third choose the US while fully half choose their homelands.

Of all the major immigrant groups, Latin Americans are the only ones who

say their chances of being safe from crime are better here—and by a significant margin (53% say in the US versus 27% in the homeland). Immigrants from Europe and Latin America are somewhat more likely to prefer US for moral values than are other immigrants, while, at 63%, Asians are the most likely to prefer the values of their homeland.

On the other hand, more than four in five immigrants (82%) say that economic opportunities are more available to them in the United States while only

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6% say it is better in the country where they were born. A slightly higher percentage (86%) says economic opportunities for their children are better here.

In fact, belief in the American Dream is nearly universal among immigrants and is higher than in Gallup surveys of the general public. More than nine in ten immigrants (93%) agree that people who work hard to better themselves can get ahead in this country, compared with 85% of all national adults in a survey taken earlier in June. A high proportion of immigrants (70%) also agree that their children will have even better economic opportunities in this country than they have had.

Another major US credential is greater political freedom. Overall, 75% of immigrants say the level of political freedom in the US is better than what they experienced in their homeland; only 5% say their homeland is better. This assessment of the US varies somewhat by country of origin, with Asians, Latinos and Caribbeans choosing the US in the highest numbers (80% or more), Euro-

peans by a moderately high number (66%), and Canadians evenly split (41% for the US vs. 40% for Canada).

Two-thirds of all immigrants (66%) also think the chances of being treated fairly under the law are better in the United States; only 15% think the chances are better in their homeland. A majority of Asians, Latin Americans and Europeans choose the US, while Canadians choose their homeland.

Non-Europeans Face Greater Bias

American hospitality toward immigrants appears far from perfect, with negative reactions to Asians seeming to be particularly high. Most immigrants (61%) say they have never felt discriminated against specifically for being foreign born, but a significant minority—about four in ten—say they have felt this kind of bias.

When it comes to anti-immigrant bias, however, there are striking differences by country of origin, with a majority of Asian (60%) and Caribbean (55%) respondents reporting this kind of discrimination at some time, as do a significant proportion of immigrants born in Latin America (44%). Only 23% of Europeans and 12% of Canadians have felt such bias against them.

More generally, a significant minority agree with the statement that “The US is a racist country.” Four in ten hold this view while just over half (55%) disagree. Immigrants most likely to perceive racism are recent arrivals and young adults—among whom close to 50% agree. Immigrants who have been here longer than 20 years or who are over the age of 65 soundly reject the notion of national racism.

Just when acts of discrimination against these immigrants had occurred is not specified, but separate poll questions indicate that, at least initially, most immigrants felt “welcome” in the United States and that they still feel welcome today. The vast majority among all ethnic groups (about 80%) say they felt

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welcome when they first came to this country. Barely one in ten (9%) say they felt unwelcome. This positive assessment is even higher when immigrants focus on how they feel today: 90% now feel welcome and only 7% unwelcome.

Poll findings suggest ethnicity is not related to general feelings of welcomeness, but age at the time of immigration is. Those who came to the United States in their teen years (between 10 and 17 years of age) are much more likely to have felt discriminated against than those who arrived as children or adults. More than half (53%) of those who came as teenagers felt they had suffered discrimination compared with only 36% of those who were under 10 and 35% of those aged 30 and over. Teens are also slightly more likely to say they felt “unwelcome” when they first came here.

While this could be an indication of elevated levels of anti-immigrant prejudice among their American teen peers, it could also be the result of a higher degree of sensitivity on the part of teen immigrants.

Multiculturalism Rejected

Despite the poll findings suggesting that immigrants maintain strong cultural ties to their homeland, English-speaking immigrants clearly favor an approach to immigration which requires blending into the American culture rather than maintaining some important aspects of their original cultures. The so-called “multiculturalism” effort to preserve ethnic identity is vigorously favored by only 27% of immigrants and 32% of national adults, whereas assimilation is favored by 59% of both immigrants and national adults.

Not only do immigrants prefer the more traditional approach to immigration, but they feel the phrase “melting pot”—people of different cultures blending into a unified American culture—is an accurate description of the US today. Three-quarters of immigrants agree with this characterization, while just 20% disagree.

Immigrants cite a variety of reasons for choosing to come to the United States. About one quarter (26%) say they were seeking a better job or business opportu-

nity. Another quarter (26%) say their primary motivation was to be with family already living here—including a small percentage (largely women) who say they married an American. About one out of every five immigrants (19%) say they came to the US primarily to go to school. About one in every eight (13%) sought political freedom, while only 2% say that religious freedom, specifically, was the main reason they came.

The relative importance of education as a reason for coming to the US appears to have been increasing over the last twenty years, while the importance of family relations has been decreasing. Among those who emigrated to the US before 1974, nearly one-third (30%) say the primary reason they came was to be with family here in the US; just 14% say they came to go to school. But among those who arrived since 1975, only 20% say they came to be with family while 26% came to go to school.

Solid Commitment

Two-thirds of the English speaking immigrant population in the US (69%) feel certain they would prefer to live out their lives in the US; just 16% would prefer to live in the country where they were born.

Commitment to remaining in America is broadest among those immigrants who came here seeking political freedom, with more than four in five (82%) preferring to remain here. Family ties in the US also appear to be a strong force binding immigrants to this country, with 76% of those who originally came to the US following family members saying they are certain about wanting to remain here.

A slightly smaller percentage of those who came seeking job opportunities (65%) and fewer than half (45%) of those coming for education feel certain about making the US their permanent home.

Maintain An “Open Door”

Immigrants’ generally upbeat view of the United States and the opportunities available here provides an interesting backdrop to their favorable attitude toward future immigration. Most immigrants appear to have every bit as much

of a stake in this country as do those born here. They believe in the American Dream, and feel strongly about wanting to stay here. According to the poll, immigrants work, pay taxes, and are either citizens or want to become citizens someday. But they feel far less threatened by the prospect of additional legal immigrants than does the population at large. At the same time, their attitudes toward illegal immigration suggest they are nearly as protective of US borders as the general public.

A majority of immigrants hold a more open view of legal immigration than the public at large: 44% prefer keeping immigration at its present level and another 15% want to see it increased. Only one-third of immigrants would like to see legal immigration levels in this country decreased. By contrast only one-third of the general population wants legal immigration either expanded or maintained, while two-thirds (65%) would like to see it decreased.

Asked specifically about the current proposal for a 5-year moratorium on immigration, most immigrants are opposed (69%) while only one-quarter (24%) favor the idea. Concerning illegal immigration, close to half of immigrants (47%) and 57% of all national adults favor a California Proposition 187-style proposal that would deny all forms of public assistance to people living here illegally. About six in ten immigrants and national adults favor a mandatory national identification card that could be used to distinguish legal from illegal residents.

Tolerance of further immigration somewhat decreases in relation to length of time in the US, but even a majority of immigrants who have been here over 20 years favor the more open approach, including a majority of people of European descent as well as those of Latin, Asian and Caribbean descent. Most immigrants who are now citizens, as well as those who still aspire to citizenship, favor the open approach. The “open door” is inherent in the American mystique. Those who passed through it treasure it.



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