

Quillette

To Fight Wokeness, the GOP Should Embrace Immigrant Voters

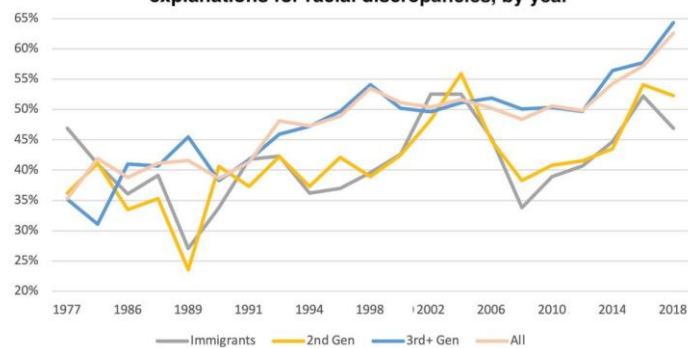
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The rise of ultra-progressive ideologies and the decline in patriotic sentiment are two broad cultural trends that worry American conservatives. Some may be tempted to imagine that these two phenomena are connected to immigration and the resulting ethnic and racial diversity—especially since opposition to immigration is common among conservatives for security, economic, and cultural reasons. Contrary to conservative worries, however, immigration and diversity can actually *reduce* the impact of wokeness while boosting American patriotism.

It is true that most immigrant families require two or three generations to achieve total or near-total cultural assimilation into American life. But it is during this transition period that immigrants and their children are most likely to hold conservative values. Ultra-progressive beliefs such as Critical Race Theory and esoteric concepts of gender are not immigrant imports, but rather reflect the beliefs (or professed beliefs) of long-settled US-born natives.

A long running General Social Survey (GSS) question about race, going back to 1977, has asked: “On average, blacks have worse jobs, income, and housing than white people. Do you think these differences are because most blacks just don’t have the motivation or willpower to pull themselves out of poverty?” A progressive person will obviously be inclined to answer “no,” while a (*very*) non-woke person will answer “yes.” Overall, 35 percent of respondents said no in 1977, a figure that almost doubled to 63 percent in 2018. (See Figure 1, below.)

FIGURE 1: Percentage of GSS respondents who reject individual-based explanations for racial discrepancies, by year



This general trend shouldn't come as a surprise. But when you break down the data, surprises do emerge. Only 34 percent of native-born Americans gave the progressive response in 1977, a number that soared to 65 percent in 2018. For immigrants, however, the share delivering the progressive response—47 percent—was the same in 2018 as it was in 1977 (though it fluctuated during the interim).

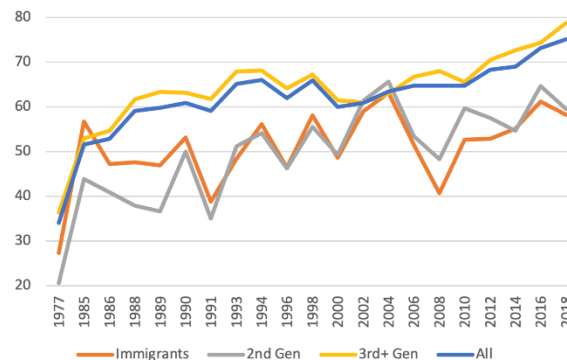
When it comes to avant-garde ideas about identity, non-white immigrants tend to be less woke than the progressive (and largely white) Americans who often purport to speak or act on behalf of non-whites. At a Loudoun County, VA school board meeting in June 2021, for instance, the fiercest critic of the (mostly native-born Americans) who'd championed the decision to teach Critical Race Theory was Xi Van Fleet, a Chinese immigrant who fled to the United States after living through Mao's Cultural Revolution. "I've been very alarmed by what's going on in our schools," she said. "You are now teaching, training our children to be social justice warriors and to loathe our country and our history." A school-board recall election targeting San Francisco's wokest board members, similarly, was co-led up by Siva Raj, an immigrant from India awaiting permanent residency.

Of course, there are outliers on both sides. Hari Kondabolu, a second-generation US-born child of Indian immigrants, produced a documentary that resulted in the cancellation of the fictional Indian-American character Apu in *The Simpsons*. On the other wing is Vivek Ramaswamy, the Ohio-born son of Indian immigrants. The title of his book, *Woke, Inc: Inside Corporate America's Social Justice Scam*, tells you all you need to know about his views.

The divide between native-born progressives and immigrants is expressed in language usage. According to Pew Research, only 16 percent of immigrant Latinos have even *heard* of the now-fashionable (but entirely unnecessary, and widely mocked) term "Latinx" as a substitute for Latino or Hispanic; and only two percent of them use it—a percentage smaller than the 2.9 percent margin of error in the Pew survey. (Of native-born Latinos, 32 percent have heard of the term Latinx and four percent use it.)

Another GSS question that has been asked since 1977 relates to the following statement: "It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family." A person with progressive opinions would of course be more likely to answer "no" when asked if he or she agrees with this, and a person with conservative gender opinions would be more likely to answer "yes." (See Figure 2, below.)

FIGURE 2: Percentage of GSS respondents who reject conservative gender norms, by year



As one might expect, the percentage of respondents who express the progressive “no” has risen for all groups over time. Native-born Americans and immigrants held roughly similar opinions on this in the 1970s and early 1980s. But by 2018, native-born opposition to conservative gender norms had risen to 78 percent, while the share of immigrants remained largely unchanged at 58 percent.

When it comes to implementing progressive policies and wokeness through public policy, the immigrant share of a state’s population is strongly correlated with states whose governments have banned the use of affirmative action (a step that obviously accords with conservative preferences). Overall, in fact, affirmative action appears to be a more politically stable policy choice in jurisdictions that feature two main racial groups: one that’s large, and another (beneficiary) group that’s small. More immigration tends to cause this binary relationship to become more complex, and the resulting diversity undermines the political will for affirmative action.

Voters in California—the most diverse state, and the one with the highest immigrant share of population—first voted to ban affirmative action when presented with Proposition 209 in 1996. Since then, progressives in the state have attempted to revive the issue. But in 2011, Governor Jerry Brown vetoed a bill that would have weakened the affirmative-action ban. Another proposal to re-institute affirmative action failed in 2014 after several Asian-American state senators defected from the effort in response to opposition from their constituents. “As lifelong advocates for the Asian-American and other communities,” Democratic state senators Ted Lieu, Carol Liu, and Leland Yee wrote, “we would never support a policy that we believed would negatively impact our children.” In 2020, voters affirmed the state’s ban on affirmative action by a wider margin than the original vote to ban it 24 years earlier.

Most Americans think of Hispanics when they think of immigrants. But Asian Americans are the most likely to be foreign-born of any large ethnic or racial group. In 2019, about one-third of Hispanics in California were foreign-born, as compared to about two thirds of Asian Americans. The latter group would be the biggest losers in any shift toward affirmative action. (Most Asian Americans support affirmative action, but those opposed are more politically motivated.)

Then there is the question of the labor supply, which immigrants expand. Depending on other factors, this can increase competition for jobs and depress wages. That is why, more than 100 years ago, Samuel Gompers, founder of the American Federation of Labor, wrote that, “Those who favor unrestricted immigration care nothing for the people. They are simply desirous of flooding the country with unskilled as well as skilled labor of other lands for the purpose of breaking down American [living] standards.” And while we are conditioned to associate both unions and support for immigration with the left side of the political spectrum, Gompers’s view of immigrants was shared by most union leaders and members until relatively recently, when some unions began supporting immigration reform as part of the broader Democratic coalition.

Unionization rose after anti-immigration laws signed by Republican Presidents Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge stopped the flow of workers into the United States in the 1920s. That, in turn, helped Washington expand government-assistance programs. As Paul Krugman aptly observed, “absent those [1920s immigration] restrictions, there would have been many claims, justified or not, about people flocking to America to take advantage of welfare.” The late labor economist and immigration restrictionist Vernon M. Briggs Jr. similarly noted, “This era [of immigration restrictions] witnessed the enactment of the most progressive worker and family legislation the nation has ever adopted.” The New Deal and the Great Society remade the relationship between citizens and the state. None of those reforms likely would have been possible if US borders had remained open.

As for their pride in America, immigrants are generally about as patriotic as native-born Americans. And immigrants who choose to become American citizens tend to have *more* pride in being American, and are more likely to think that America is better than most other countries. Elevated patriotism even lasts into the second generation, with the children of immigrants tending to have a better opinion of the United States than Americans whose ancestors have been here longer. And a recent survey by the group More in Common found that Hispanic Americans, who are more likely to be immigrants or children of immigrants than the American average, have slightly more pride in being American than white Americans or black Americans.

All of this goes some way toward explaining why immigrants, their children, and co-ethnics shifted toward the Republican Party in the 2020 election. According to the American National Election Survey, Trump’s share of the foreign-born vote increased from 25 percent in 2016 to 30 percent in 2020. Among Hispanics, his share surged from 28 percent in 2016 to 38 percent in 2020. Much of this shift toward Trump is plausibly linked to woke excesses among Democrats, and issues such as crime and border policy—issues that aren’t going away. (The shift still didn’t raise Trump’s share of the Hispanic vote to the level of that earned by pro-immigration George W. Bush in 2004, but it was close, and will likely be closer still in 2024.)

Conservatives have hurt themselves by driving immigrants into the arms of the Democratic Party instead of appealing to their cultural conservatism. In 1994, for instance, the California Republican Party alienated the state’s Hispanic voters as it pushed Proposition 187, which would have (redundantly) denied many public services to illegal immigrants, and forced state employees to report illegal immigrants to federal authorities for deportation.

Such mistakes often have political ramifications that last for decades. And going forward, the GOP can increase its chances in future elections if it stops blaming immigrants for problems such as crime, and instead embraces the various ways in which these newcomers are a good fit as non-woke Republican voters.

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