

What Is An American?

Debate

What does it mean to be an American? This deceptively simple question is challenging to answer. Because the United States encompasses a vast array of ethnicities, religions, and cultures, it can be difficult to define "American" by reference to those criteria. The country's geography differs dramatically from region to region, and economic ways of life accordingly differ greatly as well. In many ways, diverse groups of Americans have experienced American history differently, so a common historical identity is not obviously the answer either. One popular argument is that the United States is united by a set of political ideals. As far back as the early nineteenth century, scholars have tried to identify the nature of American political culture: Is it a commitment to individualism? A belief in equality? A shared set of values about the appropriate role of government? Openness?

The events of September 11, 2001, created for most Americans a profound sense of national unity. Writing ten years later, Daniel Cox, E.J. Dionne, Robert Jones, and William Galston examine survey data and report that "Americans continue to grapple with issues of security, tolerance, religious freedom, and pluralism—matters that lie at the heart of what it means to be American." Public opinion data show the country embracing diversity and tolerance, but also divided along sharp political lines. The authors suggest that these political differences may create

problems beyond the inevitable tensions that emerge in a diverse and dynamic society. In their conclusion, the authors argue that what it means to be an American has been evolving. They portray a pattern of "the classic American bargain" where new groups "become American" over a generation or two, adopting the language and culture and customs of Americans. These groups, in turn, change the nature of what it means to be an American, and later groups become American in this newly revised sense, and they themselves revise what it means to be American. In this view, the answer to "what does it mean to be an American" depends on when the question is being asked.

Steven Warshawsky argues that American identity centers around a commonly held set of ideas that can be considered the American way of life. This way of life includes beliefs in liberty, equality, property rights, religious freedom, limited government, and a common language for conducting political and economic affairs. Although America has always been a nation of immigrants, from the original European settlers to the mass immigration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Warshawsky sees assimilation into American political culture as critical to American national identity. He also notes that America, including the scope and reach of government, has changed dramatically over time. Warshawsky asks whether these changes have also changed what it means to be an American. He argues this is a difficult question but concludes that straying too far from the principles of the Founders means "we will cease to be 'Americans' in any meaningful sense of the word."

Robert P. Jones, Daniel Cox, E.J. Dionne, and William A. Galston

What It Means to Be American: Attitudes in an Increasingly Diverse America Ten Years after 9/11

Ten years after the September 11th terrorist attacks, Americans believe they are more safe but have less personal freedom and that the country is less respected in the world than it was prior to September 11, 2001. A small majority (53 percent) of Americans say that today the country is safer from terrorism than it was prior to the September 11th attacks. In contrast, nearly 8 in 10 say that Americans today have less personal freedom and nearly 7 in 10 say that America is less respected in the world today than before the terrorist attacks.

Americans strongly affirm the principles of religious freedom, religious tolerance, and separation of church and state. Nearly 9 in 10 (88 percent) Americans agree that America was founded on the idea of religious freedom for everyone, including religious groups that are unpopular. Ninety-five percent of Americans agree that all religious books should be treated with respect even if we don't share the religious beliefs of those who use them. Nearly two-thirds (66 percent) of Americans agree that we must maintain a strict separation of church and state. Americans' views of Muslims and Islam are mixed, however. As with other previously marginalized religious groups in U.S. history, Americans are grappling with the questions Islam poses to America's founding principles and way of life.

Americans who are part of the Millennial generation (ages 18–29) are twice as likely as seniors (ages 65 and older) to have daily interactions with African Americans (51 percent vs. 25 percent respectively) and Hispanics (44 percent vs. 17 percent respectively), and to speak at least occasionally to Muslims (34 percent vs. 16 percent respectively).

Nearly half (46 percent) of Americans agree that discrimination against whites has become as big a problem as discrimination against blacks and other minorities. A slim majority (51 percent) disagree.

- A slim majority of whites agree that discrimination against whites has become as big a problem as discrimination against minority groups, compared to only about 3 in 10 blacks and Hispanics who agree.
- Approximately 6 in 10 Republicans and those identifying with the Tea Party agree that discrimination against whites is as big a problem as discrimination against minority groups.
- Nearly 7 in 10 Americans who say they most trust Fox News say that discrimination against whites has become as big a problem as discrimination against blacks and other minorities. In stark contrast, less than 1 in 4 Americans who most trust public television for their news agree.

Americans are evenly divided over whether the values of Islam are at odds with American values and way of life (47 percent agree, 48 percent disagree).

- Approximately two-thirds of Republicans, Americans who identify with the Tea Party movement, and Americans who most trust Fox News agree that the values of Islam are at odds with American values. A majority of Democrats, Independents, and those who most trust CNN or public television disagree.

- Major religious groups are divided on this question. Nearly 6 in 10 white evangelical Protestants believe the values of Islam are at odds with American values, but majorities of Catholics, non-Christian religiously unaffiliated Americans, and religiously unaffiliated Americans disagree.

By a margin of 2-to-1, the general public rejects the notion that American Muslims ultimately want to establish Shari'a law as the law of the land in the United States (61 percent disagree, 30 percent agree).

- Over the last 8 months agreement with this question has increased by 7 points, from 23 percent in February 2011 to 30 percent today.
- Nearly 6 in 10 Republicans who most trust Fox News believe that American Muslims are trying to establish Shari'a law in the U.S. The attitudes of Republicans who most trust other news sources look similar to the general population.

A majority (54 percent) of the general public agree that American Muslims are an important part of the religious community in the United States, compared to 43 percent who disagree.

Nearly 8 in 10 (79 percent) Americans say people in Muslim countries have an unfavorable opinion of the United States, including 46 percent who say Muslims have a very unfavorable opinion of the United States. Among Americans who believe that people in Muslim countries have an unfavorable view of the United States, three-quarters believe that such views are not justified.

Americans employ a double standard when evaluating violence committed by self-identified Christians and Muslims. More than 8 in 10 (83 percent) Americans say that self-proclaimed Christians who commit acts of violence in the name of Christianity are not really Christians. In contrast, less than half (48 percent) of Americans say that self-proclaimed Muslims who commit acts of violence in the name of Islam are not really Muslims.

Americans hold a number of positive views about immigrants, but also have some reservations.

- Overwhelming majorities of Americans believe immigrants are hard working (87 percent) and have strong family values (80 percent), and a majority (53 percent) say newcomers from other countries strengthen American society.

- On the other hand, more than 7 in 10 (72 percent) also believe immigrants mostly keep to themselves, and a slim majority (51 percent) say they do not make an effort to learn English.

Americans are significantly more likely to say that immigrants are changing American society than their own community. A majority (53 percent) of Americans say that immigrants are changing American society and way of life a lot, compared to less than 4 in 10 (38 percent) who say immigrants are changing their community and way of life a lot. Conservatives are not more likely than liberals to say immigrants are changing their own communities a lot, but conservatives are significantly more likely than liberals to say that immigrants are changing American society a lot.

Americans' views on immigration policy are complex, but when Americans are asked to choose between a comprehensive approach to immigration reform that couples enforcement with a path to citizenship on the one hand, and an enforcement and deportation only approach on the other, Americans prefer the comprehensive approach to immigration reform over the enforcement only approach by a large margin (62 percent vs. 36 percent).

- Nearly three-quarters of Democrats and more than 6 in 10 political independents say that both securing the border and providing an earned path to citizenship is the best way to solve the illegal immigration problem. Republicans are nearly evenly divided. In contrast, nearly 6 in 10 of Americans who identify with the Tea Party movement say that securing the border and deporting all illegal immigrants is the best way to solve the illegal immigration problem.
- Majorities of every religious group say that the best way to solve the country's illegal immigration problem is to both secure the borders and provide an earned path to citizenship.

Americans express strong support for the basic tenets of the DREAM Act: allowing illegal immigrants brought to the United States as children to gain legal resident status if they join the military or go to college (57 percent favor, 40 percent oppose). And opposition to the DREAM Act is less fierce than opposition to broader reform proposals, suggesting that partial reforms based on an earned path to citizenship are likely to have a better chance of passing than broader legislation.

[These] survey findings suggest that we are in the midst of a struggle over what growing religious, racial and ethnic diversity means for American politics and society, and that partisan and ideological polarization around these questions will make them difficult to resolve. Nonetheless, this is a battle that has been waged before, and one that is likely to reach the same conclusion: New groups will—through hard work, community and an embrace of our founding values—become “American” while at the same time changing the meaning of being American in ways that, historically, have enriched the nation.

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A Nation United *and* Divided on Pluralism and Diversity

Americans are a tolerant people, but we are divided by tolerance itself. We are united in our support for religious freedom, but divided over what it means. A substantial majority would like to create a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants even as—at the very same time—a small majority would also deport all illegal immigrants.

The future points to an even more tolerant and open nation because young Americans are far more comfortable with and sympathetic to ethnic, racial and religious diversity than are older Americans. But this generational divide also translates into a political divide. If conservatives and Republicans disagree sharply with liberals and Democrats on matters of taxing and spending, they also differ substantially on a broad range of issues related to immigration and to the implications of racial, religious and ethnic diversity.

Ten years after September 11, 2001, we seem far less united as a nation. As a pioneer in the struggle for religious liberty and as a nation defined by immigration, we remain an exceptionally open country. Even Americans uneasy with diversity accept it in important ways as a norm. But we are so divided across partisan, ideological and generational lines that resolving the inevitable tensions that arise in a pluralistic society may prove to be less of a challenge than settling our *political* differences over what pluralism implies, and what it requires of us. Our national motto is “Out of many, one.” We find ourselves a very considerable distance from this aspiration—and politics, more than ethnicity, religion or race, is the reason why.

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Conclusion: The Future of American Pluralism

It would be foolish to extrapolate the future from a single survey. But these findings do reinforce a hunch: that the country is in the midst of the kind of argument it has had again and again over diversity and immigration—and that this one will be resolved as the others have been. The American pattern has been to battle fiercely over the inclusion of new groups, to ask whether this or that new group can ever “Americanize” and whether it will push the country away from its founding principles and commitments.

And then several things happen that culminate in the classic American bargain. The new groups turn out to be, or quickly become, very committed to the underlying values and principles of our democratic republic—sometimes more passionately than those who were here earlier and may have come to take them for granted. Over a generation or two, the new arrivals work hard, build strong communities, and in the process, master the English language. They become “American.” But they also change the meaning of being American in ways that, historically, have enriched the nation. And the country moves forward, still very much itself, and also transformed. Similarly, we have battled from the very beginning of our republic over the inclusion of African Americans as full citizens. Steadily, albeit with many reversals, the country has sought to live up to Martin Luther King Jr.’s insistence that the long arc of history does bend toward justice.

The generational patterns discerned in this survey suggest that while we are in for some transitional turbulence on these matters, the arc of American history will, again, bend toward inclusion.

Steven M. Warshawsky

What Does It Mean to Be an American?

“Undocumented Americans.” This is how Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid recently described the estimated 12–20 million illegal aliens living in America. What was once a Mark Steyn joke has now become the ideological orthodoxy of the Democratic Party.

Reid’s comment triggered an avalanche of outrage among commentators, bloggers, and the general public. Why? Because it strikes at the heart of the American people’s understanding of themselves as a nation and a civilization.

Indeed, opposition to the ongoing push for “comprehensive immigration reform”—i.e., amnesty and a guest worker program—is being driven by a growing concern among millions of Americans that massive waves of legal and illegal immigration—mainly from Mexico, Latin America, and Asia—coupled with the unwillingness of our political and economic elites to mold these newcomers into red-white-and-blue Americans, is threatening to change the very character of our country. For the worse.

I share this concern. I agree with the political, economic, and cultural arguments in favor of sharply curtailing immigration into the United States, as well as refocusing our immigration efforts or admitting those foreigners who bring the greatest value to—and are most easily assimilated into—American society. * * * But this essay is not intended to rehash these arguments. Rather, I wish to explore the question that underlies this entire debate: What does it mean to be an American? This may seem like an easy question to answer, but it’s not. The harder one thinks about this question, the more complex it becomes.

Clearly, Harry Reid has not given this question much thought. His implicit definition of “an American” is simply: Anyone living within the geopolitical boundaries of the United States. In other words, mere physical location on Earth determines whether or not someone is “an American.” Presumably, Reid’s definition is not intended to apply to tourists and other temporary visitors. Some degree of permanency—what the law in other contexts calls “residency,” i.e., a subjective intention to establish one’s home or domicile—is required. In Reid’s view, therefore, a Mexican from Guadalajara, a Chinese from Shanghai [sic], an Indian from Delhi, or a [fill in the blank] become “Americans” as soon as they cross into U.S. territory and decide to live here permanently, legally or not. Nothing more is needed.

This is poppycock, of course. A Mexican or a Chinese or an Indian, for example, cannot transform themselves into Americans simply by moving to this country, any more than I can become a Mexican, a Chinese, or an Indian simply by moving to their countries. Yet contemporary liberals have a vested interest in believing that they can. This is not just a function of immigrant politics, which strongly favors the Democratic Party (hence the Democrats’ growing support for voting rights for non-citizens). It also reflects the liberals’ (and some libertarians’) multicultural faith, which insists that it is morally wrong to make distinctions among different groups of people, let alone to impose a particular way of life—what heretofore has been known as the American way of life—on those who believe, speak, and act differently. Even in our own country.

In short, diversity, not Americanism, is the multicultural touchstone.

What's more, the principle of diversity, taken to its logical extreme, inevitably leads to a *rejection* of Americanism. Indeed, the ideology of multiculturalism has its roots in the radical—and anti-American—New Left and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Thus the sorry state of U.S. history and civics education in today's schools and universities, which are dominated by adherents of this intellectual poison. Moreover, when it comes to immigration, multiculturalists actually *prefer* those immigrants who are as unlike ordinary Americans as possible. This stems from their deep-rooted opposition to traditional American society, which they hope to undermine through an influx of non-western peoples and cultures.

This, in fact, describes present U.S. immigration policy, which largely is a product of the 1965 Immigration Act (perhaps Ted Kennedy's most notorious legislative achievement). The 1965 Immigration Act eliminated the legal preferences traditionally given to European immigrants, and opened the floodgates to immigration from less-developed and non-western countries. For example, in 2006 more immigrants came to the United States from Columbia, Peru, Vietnam, and Haiti (not to mention Mexico, China, and India), than from the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, and Greece. And once these immigrants arrive here, multiculturalists believe we should accommodate *our* society to the needs and desires of the newcomers, not the other way around. Thus, our government prints election ballots, school books, and welfare applications in foreign languages, while corporate America asks customers to "press one for English."

Patriotic Americans—those who love our country for its people, its history, its culture, and its ideals—reject the multiculturalists' denuded, and ultimately subversive, vision of what it means to be "an American." While the American identity is arguably the most "universal" of all major nationalities—as evidenced by the millions of immigrants the world over who have successfully assimilated into our country over the years—it is not an empty, meaningless concept. It has substance. Being "an American" is *not* the same thing as simply living in the United States. Nor, I would add, is it the same thing as holding U.S. citizenship. After all, a baby born on U.S. soil to an illegal alien is a citizen. This hardly guarantees that this baby will grow up to be *an American*.

So what, then, does it mean to be an American? I suspect that most of us believe, like Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart in describing pornography, that we "know it when we see it." For example, John Wayne, Amelia Earhart, and Bill Cosby definitely are Americans. The day laborers standing on the street corner probably are not. But how do we put this inner understanding into words?

It's not easy. Unlike most other nations on Earth, the American nation is not strictly defined in terms of race or ethnicity or ancestry or religion. George Washington may be the Father of Our Country (in my opinion, the greatest American who ever lived), but there have been in the past, and are today, many millions of patriotic, hardworking, upstanding Americans who are not Caucasian, or Christian, or of Western European ancestry. Yet they are undeniably as American as you or I (by the way, I am Jewish of predominantly Eastern European ancestry). Any definition of "American" that excludes such folks—let alone one that excludes me!—cannot be right.

Consequently, it is just not good enough to say, as some immigration restrictionists do, that this is a "white-majority, Western country." Yes, it is. But so are, for example, Ireland and Sweden and Portugal. Clearly, this level of abstraction does not take us very far towards understanding what it means to be "an American." Nor is it all that helpful to say that this is an English-speaking, predominately Christian country. While I think these features get us closer to the answer, there are millions of English-speaking (and non-English-speaking) Christians in the world who are not Americans, and millions of non-Christians who are. Certainly, these fundamental historical characteristics are important elements in determining who we are as a nation. Like other restrictionists, I am opposed to public policies that seek, by design or by default, to significantly alter the nation's "demographic profile." Still, it must be recognized that demography alone does not, and cannot, explain what it means to be an American.

So where does that leave us? I think the answer to our question, ultimately, must be found in the realms of ideology and culture. What distinguishes the United States from other nations, and what unites the disparate peoples who make up our country, are our unique political, economic, and social values, beliefs, and institutions. Not race, or religion, or ancestry.

Whether described as a "proposition nation" or a "creedal nation" or simply just "an idea," the United States of America is defined by *our way of life*. This way of life is rooted in the ideals proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence; in the system of personal liberty and limited government established by the Constitution; in our traditions of self-reliance, personal responsibility, and entrepreneurship; in our emphasis on private property, freedom of contract, and merit-based achievement; in our respect for the rule of law; and in our commitment to affording equal justice to all. Perhaps above all, it is marked by our abiding belief that, as Americans, we have been called to a higher duty in human history. We are the "city upon a hill." We are "the last, best hope of earth."

Many immigration restrictionists and so-called traditionalists chafe at the notion that the American people are not defined by “blood and soil.” Yet the truth of the matter is, we aren’t. One of the greatest patriots who ever graced this nation’s history, Teddy Roosevelt, said it best: “Americanism is a matter of the spirit and of the soul.” Roosevelt deplored what he called “hyphenated Americanism,” which refers to citizens whose primary loyalties lie with their particular ethnic groups or ancestral lands. Such a man, Roosevelt counseled, is to be “unsparingly condemn[ed].”

But Roosevelt also recognized that “if he is heartily and singly loyal to this Republic, then no matter where he was born, he is just as good an American as anyone else.” Roosevelt’s words are not offered here to suggest that all foreigners are equally capable of assimilating into our country. Clearly, they aren’t. Nevertheless, the appellation “American” is open to anyone who adopts our way of life and loves this country above all others.

Which brings me to the final, and most difficult, aspect of this question: How do we define the “American way of life”? This is the issue over which our nation’s “culture wars” are being fought. Today the country is divided between those who maintain their allegiance to certain historically American values, beliefs, and institutions (but not all—see racial segregation), and those who want to replace them with a very different set of ideas about the role of government, the nature of political and economic liberty, and the meaning of right and wrong. Are both sides in this struggle equally “American”?

Moreover, the “American way of life” has changed over time. We no longer have the Republic that existed in TR’s days. The New Deal and Great Society revolutions—enthusiastically supported, I note, by millions of white, Christian, English-speaking citizens—significantly altered the political, economic, and social foundations of this country. Did they also change what it means to be “an American”? Is being an American equally compatible, for example, with support for big government versus small government? The welfare state versus rugged individualism? Socialism versus capitalism? And so on. Plainly, this is a much harder historical and intellectual problem than at first meets the eye.

Personally, I do not think the meaning of America is nearly so malleable as today’s multiculturalists assume. But neither is it quite as narrow as many restrictionists contend. Nevertheless, I am convinced that being *an American* requires something more than merely living in this country, speaking English, obeying the law, and holding a job (although this would be a very good start!). What this

“something more” is, however, is not self-evident, and, indeed, is the subject of increasingly bitter debate in this country.

Yet one thing is certain: If we stray too far from the lines laid down by the Founding Fathers and the generations of great American men and women who built on their legacy, we will cease to be “Americans” in any meaningful sense of the word. As Abraham Lincoln warned during the secession era, “America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.” Today the danger is not armed rebellion, but the slow erasing of the American national character through a process of political and cultural redefinition. If this ever happens, it will be a terrible day for this country, and for the world.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is it important for the United States to have a sense of shared values or not? What are the risks and benefits for individuals and the country of having a sense of shared values?
2. Political scientists and historians often refer to “American exceptionalism,” or the idea that the United States was founded and grew from historically unique circumstances that gave it a distinctive political culture, set of values, and sense of how government, the economy, society, and individuals intersect. For example, compared to other democratic countries, Americans place more emphasis on individual rights, and the United States features much greater decentralization of political power across the branches and levels of government. Do these outcomes *require* the kind of shared beliefs discussed by Warshawsky or could they also be sustained in the absence of shared beliefs?
3. Occasionally in political campaigns a candidate’s beliefs or actions will be described as “un-American.” What do you think people mean when they use this term? Would you describe any of the views presented in the Jones et al. survey data as un-American? If so, what makes a view un-American to you? If not, are there any beliefs that you would define as un-American?
4. A visitor from another country asks you, “What does it mean to be an American?” What do you say?