

Recent Trends in American Attitudes toward the Level of Immigration

ABSTRACT In the current immigration debate, although illegal immigration is at the center of the controversy, legal immigration is also gaining attention. However, there is a lack of analysis of how American attitudes toward the level of legal immigration have changed in the recent years of the twenty-first century. This study investigates recent trends in American attitudes toward the level of immigration to the United States using data from General Social Surveys 2004–2014. Bivariate analysis indicates that, contrary to popular expectations, American attitudes toward support for an increased level of immigration had actually become somewhat more positive from 2004 to 2014. The results of multiple regression analysis show that, controlling for other variables, American attitudes toward support for an increased level of immigration have remained more positive since 2010. This article explores plausible explanations for the more positive trends.

KEYWORDS: trends, American attitudes, public support, level of immigration, legal immigration, twenty-first century

Immigration is again taking the center stage in the United States national discourse. As the Trump administration is extending immigration control from undocumented immigration to legal immigration, research on American attitudes toward legal immigration is gaining importance. American attitudes toward the level of immigration to the United States has been studied historically.¹ However, while there are a couple of scholarly studies that examine trends in American attitudes toward the level of immigration before the current century, there is a dearth of academic research on changes in American attitudes toward the level of immigration in the twenty-first century.² Furthermore, the impact of such important events as the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the Great Recession of 2006–2009 on American attitudes requires documentation despite some claims that have been made.³

1. See, for example, Thomas Espenshade and Katherine Hempstead, "Contemporary American Attitudes Toward U.S. Immigration," *The International Migration Review* 30, no. 2 (1996): 535–70; Edwin Harwood, "American Public Opinion and US Immigration Policy," *The Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science* 487, no. 1 (1986): 201–12; John S. Lapinski, Pia Peltola, Greg Shaw, and Alan Yang, "The Polls—Trends Immigrants and Immigration," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 61 (1997): 356–83; Rita Simon, "Immigration and American Attitudes," *Public Opinion* 10 (1987): 47–50; Michael Sobczak, *The New Americans: Recent Immigration and American Society* (El Paso, TX: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2010); Philip Q. Yang, "Black-White Differential in Support for Immigration," *Ethnic Studies Review* 26, no. 2 (2003): 1–27.

2. Harwood, "American Public Opinion and US Immigration Policy;" Lapinski et al., "The Polls."

3. Victoria M. Esses, John F. Dovidio, and Gordon Hodson, "Public Attitudes Toward Immigration in the United States and Canada in Response to the September 11, 2001 'Attack on America,'" *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 2, no. 1, (2002): 69–85; Robert T. Hitlan, Kimberly Carrillo, Michael A. Zarate, and Shelley N. Aikman,

Additionally, available studies and surveys of trends in American attitudes toward the level of immigration prior to the twenty-first century and in the current century are descriptive, only reporting percentages without controlling for factors that can influence attitudes.⁴ It is important to study American attitudes toward immigration so that policymakers can accurately sense public moods and make informed immigration policy decisions.

To fill the void in the literature, this study investigates recent trends in American attitudes toward the level of immigration in the recent years of the twenty-first century. This article seeks to answer three research questions: (1) How have American attitudes toward the level of immigration changed in the recent years of the twenty-first century? (2) How have American attitudes toward the level of immigration changed in the recent years of the twenty-first century, holding other variables constant? (3) Who is more or less likely to support an increased level of immigration? The remainder of this article proposes hypotheses that seek to answer the research questions; depicts the data, variables, and measurements used to test the hypotheses as well as the methods of analysis; presents the findings; and finally discusses the implications of the findings.

HYPOTHESES

Our first hypothesis is that American attitudes toward the level of immigration have become less favorable in the recent years of the twenty-first century. In the same vein, our second hypothesis predicts that American attitudes toward the level of immigration have become less favorable in the recent years of the twenty-first century, holding other variables constant.

The above hypotheses are built upon three main considerations. First, the 9/11 terrorist attacks have increased the national fear of foreign invasion and a sense of urgency for immigration control.⁵ The horrifying Al-Qaeda attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, signified the entry of the United States into the War on Terror. The surprising 9/11 attacks robbed the innocence of many Americans and inflicted on Americans a sense of anxiety and trepidation toward foreign invasion. This anxiety and trepidation naturally led to a greater willingness for immigration control.

Second, associated with the first factor, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks anti-immigration forces stepped up pressure on politicians at the local, state, and federal levels to control immigration. Examples of this pressure include: the Minutemen Project started in August 2004 by a group of activists who favored building a wall and increasing border patrol agents along the Mexico-United States borders; Arizona's controversial Senate Bill

"Attitudes Toward Immigrant Groups and the September 11 Terrorist Attacks," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 13, no. 2 (2007): 135-52.

4. Gallup Organization, "Immigration | Gallup Historical Trends – Gallup News," accessed November 28, 2017, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/1660/immigration.aspx>; Harwood, "American Public Opinion and US Immigration Policy;" Lapinski et al., "The Polls."

5. Esses et al., "Public Attitudes Toward Immigration in the United States and Canada in Response to the September 11, 2001 'Attack on America'"; Hitlan et al., "Attitudes Toward Immigrant Groups and the September 11 Terrorist Attacks."

1070 enacted in 2010; a growing number of immigration control bills introduced and enacted in other states; the enactment of the Real ID Act of 2005 and the Secure Fence Act of 2006; and the campaign rhetoric of presidential candidates. Through media coverage, this pressure may have impacted the mood of Americans toward immigration control.

Third, the Great Recession of 2006–2009 had a devastating impact on the United States economy affecting many American lives, and this may have shaped public mood in favor of pausing and controlling immigration until life returned to normal.

To answer the third research question, we propose the following hypotheses pertinent to age, gender, race, religion, nativity, urban/rural residence, region, education, social class, and political party affiliation suggested by prior studies.⁶ Older people are less likely than younger people to favor a high level of immigration. Men are less sympathetic than women toward an increase in the level of immigration. Blacks and other races are more likely than whites to support an increase in immigration. Protestants are less likely than non-Protestants to support an increase in immigration. Individuals born in the United States are less likely than those born on foreign soil to support an increase in immigration. Urban residents are more likely than their rural counterparts to support an increase in immigration. Residents living in the Northeast, Midwest, and West are more likely than those residing in the South to support an increase in immigration. Individuals with a higher level of education are more likely than those with a lower level of education to favor an increase in immigration. People of a higher social class are more likely than those of a lower social class to favor an increase in immigration. Republicans are less likely than non-Republicans to support an increase in immigration.

DATA AND METHODS

The data for this study come from General Social Surveys (GSS) 2004–2014 conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.⁷ The GSS is a nationally representative sample of noninstitutionalized United States adults aged 18 or older. Only cases with a valid response to the dependent variable (i.e., attitude toward the level of immigration) are included. The restricted sample consists of 9,509 cases. Since the GSS interviewed only one adult per household, the respondents in a bigger household had

6. Charles R. Chandler and Yung-meu Tsai, “Social Factors Influencing Immigration Attitudes: An Analysis of Data from the General Social Survey,” *The Social Science Journal* 38 (2001): 177–88; Espenshade and Hempstead, “Contemporary American Attitudes Toward U.S. Immigration”; Judith L. Goldstein and Margaret E. Peters, “Nativism or Economic Threat: Attitudes Toward Immigrants During the Great Recession,” *International Interactions* 40 (2014): 376–401; M.V. Hood III and Irwin L. Morris, “Amigo o Enemigo?: Context, Attitudes, and Anglo Public Opinion Toward Immigration,” *Social Science Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (1997): 309–23; Marilyn Hoskin and William Mishler, “Public Opinion Toward New Migrants: A Comparative,” *International Migration* 21 (1983): 440–62; Benjamin R. Knoll, “And Who Is My Neighbor? Religion and Immigration Policy Attitudes,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 2 (2009): 313–31; Patricia Lyons, Lauren Coursey, and Jared Kenworthy, “National Identity and Group Narcissism as Predictors of Intergroup Attitudes Toward Undocumented in the United States,” *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 35, no. 3 (2013): 323–35; Sobczak, *The New Americans*; Yang, “Black-White Differential in Support for Immigration.”

7. Tom Smith, Peter V. Marsden, and Michael Hout, *General Social Survey, 1972–2014* (Chicago, IL: National Opinion Research Center, 2015).

a smaller chance of being selected than those in a smaller household. Hence, we weighted the data so that our results can be generalized to the population.

The dependent variable is attitude toward the level of immigration, which is based on the following question: "Do you think the number of immigrants to America nowadays should . . ." This is an ordinal variable with five categories: (1) increase a lot, (2) increase a little, (3) remain as it is, (4) decrease a little, and (5) decrease a lot. We reverse coded this variable so that a higher value indicates a higher level of support for an increase in immigration.

The main independent variable is year. To test the nonlinear effect of year on attitude toward the level of immigration, the five survey years under study (2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014) were recoded individually as dummy variables with 1 indicating the designated year and 0 otherwise and with 2004 as the reference category.

The control variables include age, gender, race, religion, nativity, urban residence, region, education, social class, and party affiliation. Age is an interval/ratio variable ranging from 18 to 89 or older. Gender is a dummy variable coded 1 for female and coded 0 for male. We created two dummy variables for race: one for black and the other for other race with white as the reference category. For religion, we created a dummy variable for Protestant. Nativity is a dummy variable coded 1 for native and coded 0 for foreign-born. Urban residency is a dummy variable with 1 indicating urban and suburban area and 0 indicating rural area. We created three dummy variables for region: Northeast, Midwest, and West with South as the reference category. Education is an interval/ratio variable varying from 0 to 20 years of schooling. Three dummy variables for social class were created with lower class as the reference category: working class, middle class, and upper class. A dummy variable was created for Republican with 1 for Republicans and 0 otherwise.

Some limitations of the GSS should be acknowledged. The question on the dependent variable regarding the level of immigration was not surveyed in 2002. A question about the level of immigration was surveyed in 2000 but the wording was somewhat different, so we decided not to include 2000 for the compatibility of the data. This leaves the first few years of the twenty-first century absent. Ideally, annual data are preferred, but the GSS has adopted a biennial format since 1994 and skipped the odd years. In addition, the wording of the question on the level of immigration implied legal immigrants but were not explicit, leaving room for interpretation.

Since the dependent variable is ordinal, ordinal logistic regression seems to be most appropriate. We tested ordinal logistic regression models, but the parallel line assumption is not met. Hence, we decided to use ordinary least squares (OLS) regression instead because the dependent variable has five categories with a relatively normal distribution. The conclusions based on the OLS regression models are virtually the same as those based on the ordinal logistic regression models. We began with a descriptive analysis of all the variables utilized in the study. We then performed a bivariate analysis of American attitudes toward the level of immigration by year. Finally, we tested two OLS regression models. Model 1 includes dummy variables for years, and model 2 adds control variables to Model 1 to examine changes in support for immigration while holding other variables constant and assessing who is more or less likely to favor a high level of immigration.

RESULTS

Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive statistics of all variables used in this analysis are shown in Table 1. The mean of the dependent variable (2.4) indicates that the support of the American public for an increased level of immigration during 2004–2014 was close to the middle level—maintaining the same level of immigration. There were slightly higher percentages of respondents in 2004 (21 percent) and 2006 (20 percent) than in later years. As shown in Table 1, the average age of the respondents was about 46 years old. The mean of a dummy variable can be interpreted as percentage after multiplying it by 100. About 54 percent of the respondents were female, and 46 percent were male. Blacks constituted 13 percent of the sample, together with 11 percent of other race, and 76 percent of whites. Eighty-seven percent of the respondents were born in the United States, while 13 percent were foreign-born. Forty-eight percent of the respondents were Protestants, and the rest of them were non-Protestants. More respondents (37 percent) lived in the South than in any other region. Most respondents (89 percent) resided in urban and suburban areas. On average, the respondents completed 13.6 years of schooling with a standard deviation of 3 years. Most respondents self-identified as the middle class (46 percent) or working class (44 percent), and the remaining 10 percent self-claimed lower class or upper class. Republicans made up 26 percent of the sample.

Bivariate Analysis

Figure 1 displays trends in American attitudes toward the level of immigration from 2004 to 2014 in percentage. The percentage for “increase a lot” had shown a slightly increasing trend with fluctuation from 3.5 percent in 2004 to 4.3 percent in 2014. The percentage for “increase a little” had steadily increased from 6.5 percent in 2004 to 10.2 percent in 2014. The percentage for “remain as it is” had over time increased from 35.2 percent in 2004 to 40.5 percent in 2014. The percentage for “decrease a little” had decreased with fluctuation from 28.3 percent in 2004 to 23 percent in 2014. The percentage for “decrease a lot” had decreased with fluctuation from 26.5 percent in 2004 to 22.1 percent in 2014, and the declines were most conspicuous since 2010. The overall trend was changes toward more positive attitudes.

Regression Analysis

Table 2 presents the results of OLS regression analysis. Model 1 shows changes in the level of support for an increased immigration. The insignificant coefficients for the dummy variables for 2006 and 2008 indicate that respondents in 2006 and 2008 were not significantly different from respondents in 2004 in support for an increased level of immigration. However, the significant or highly significant positive coefficients for the dummy variables for 2010 to 2014 reveal that respondents in 2010 and especially 2012 and 2014 were significantly more likely to favor an increased level of immigration than respondents in 2004. The magnitudes indicate that the later the year, the greater the level of support for an increased level of immigration. Figure 2 based on the coefficients of the year dummy variables vividly shows the changes in support for an increased level of immigration over time.

TABLE 1. Means and standard deviations of variables used in the analysis,
U.S. adults, GSS 2004–2014

Variables	Mean	Standard deviations
Dependent Variable		
Support for an Increased Level of Immigration (5-points scale)	2.40	1.08
Independent Variable		
Year (Ref. = 2004)		
2006	0.20	0.40
2008	0.14	0.34
2010	0.15	0.35
2012	0.13	0.34
2014	0.17	0.38
Control Variables		
Age	45.69	17.01
Female	0.54	0.50
Race (Ref. = White)		
Black	0.13	0.34
Other	0.11	0.31
Protestant	0.48	0.50
Native Born	0.87	0.34
Urban	0.89	0.32
Region (Ref. = South)		
Midwest	0.23	0.42
Northeast	0.17	0.37
West	0.23	0.42
Education	13.58	3.01
Class (Ref. = Lower)		
Working	0.44	0.50
Middle	0.46	0.50
Upper	0.03	0.17
Republican	0.26	0.44

Source: General Social Surveys, 2004–2014.

Note that Model 1 explains only less than 1 percent of the variance in support for an increased level of immigration ($R^2 = .006$). Nevertheless, by including the control variables, Model 2 ($R^2 = .125$) increases the variance explained by 11.9 percent compared to Model 1. The patterns of the regression coefficients remain essentially the same as those in Model 1. Namely, controlling for other predictors, respondents in 2006 and 2008 did not differ significantly from those in 2004 in support for an increased level of immigration, but respondents since 2010 were significantly more likely to favor an increased level of immigration than those

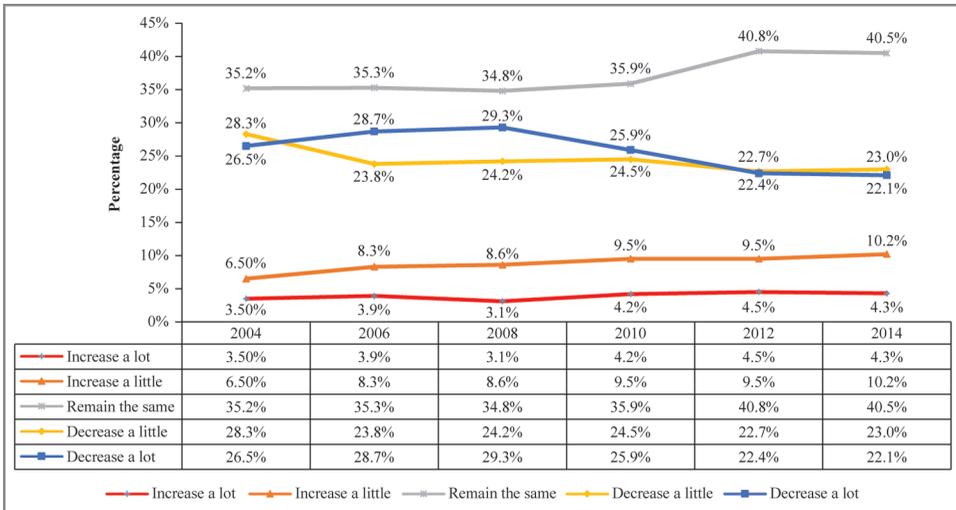


FIGURE 1. Trends in American attitudes toward level of immigration, 2004–2014.

in 2004. The trajectory is also shown in Figure 2, which is based on the coefficients of the year dummy variables in Model 2. These results provide mixed evidence for hypotheses 1 and 2.

Results in Model 2 can also answer the third research question. As hypothesized, older people were indeed less likely than younger people to support an increased level of immigration. Contrary to our hypothesis, gender made no difference in support for an increased level of immigration. Consistent with our hypothesis, blacks and other races were more likely than whites to support an increased level of immigration. Aligned with our hypothesis, Protestants were less likely than non-Protestants to support an increased level of immigration. Our hypothesis that natives are less likely than the foreign-born to support an increased level of immigration is borne out by the evidence. Congruous with our hypothesis, urban and suburban dwellers were more likely than rural residents to support an increased level of immigration. Consistent with our hypothesis, residents in the West were significantly more likely than Southerners to support an increased level of immigration, but residents in the Northeast and Midwest were not significantly different statistically from the Southerners despite their more favorable attitudes. As hypothesized, more educated people were more likely than those less educated to support an increased level of immigration. As expected, working-class, middle-class, and upper-class people were more likely than lower-class people to support an increased level of immigration, although the difference between working class and lower class was not statistically significant at the .05 level; in fact, the higher the class, the higher the level of support. Finally, as anticipated, Republicans were less likely to support an increased level of immigration than their non-Republican counterparts.

CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this study is that contrary to popular expectations and our hypotheses, American attitudes toward the level of immigration in the recent years of

TABLE 2. OLS regression models predicting support for an increased level of immigration, U.S. adults (Standard errors in parentheses), GSS 2004–2014

Predictor	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	β	B	β
Constant	2.322*** (.024)		2.409*** (.083)	
Years (Ref. = 2004)				
2006	.028 (.034)	.100	-.013 (.033)	-.005
2008	-.003 (.038)	-.001	-.005 (.036)	-.002
2010	.095* (.038)	.031	.081* (.036)	.026
2012	.188*** (.039)	.059	.144*** (.037)	.045
2014	.195*** (.036)	.068	.146*** (.034)	.051
Age			-.005*** (.001)	-.074
Female			.004 (.021)	.002
Race (Ref. = White)				
Black			.229*** (.033)	.072
Other			.307*** (.039)	.089
Protestant			-.140*** (.023)	-.065
Native			-.634*** (.035)	-.200
Urban			.145*** (.034)	.042
Region (Ref. = South)				
Northeast			.038 (.032)	.013
Midwest			.042 (.028)	.017
West			.083** (.029)	.033
Education			.037*** (.004)	.103
Class (Ref. = Lower)				
Working			.041 (.042)	.019
Middle			.139*** (.043)	.064
Upper			.485*** (.074)	.075
Republican			-.208*** (.025)	-.085
R ²	.006		.125	
F	10.90***		67.1***	
N	9,509		9,396	

*p \leq .05 **p \leq .01 ***p \leq .001 (1-tailed test).

the twenty-first century have generally become more positive. The results of the bivariate analysis reveal that the percentage of Americans who felt the level of US immigration should increase a lot or a little had increased from 2004 to 2014 while the percentage of Americans who felt the level of US immigration should decrease a lot or a little had declined in the same period. The results of the multiple regression analysis show that with or without the control variables in the regression models, the American public's support for an increased level of immigration was not much different between 2004 and

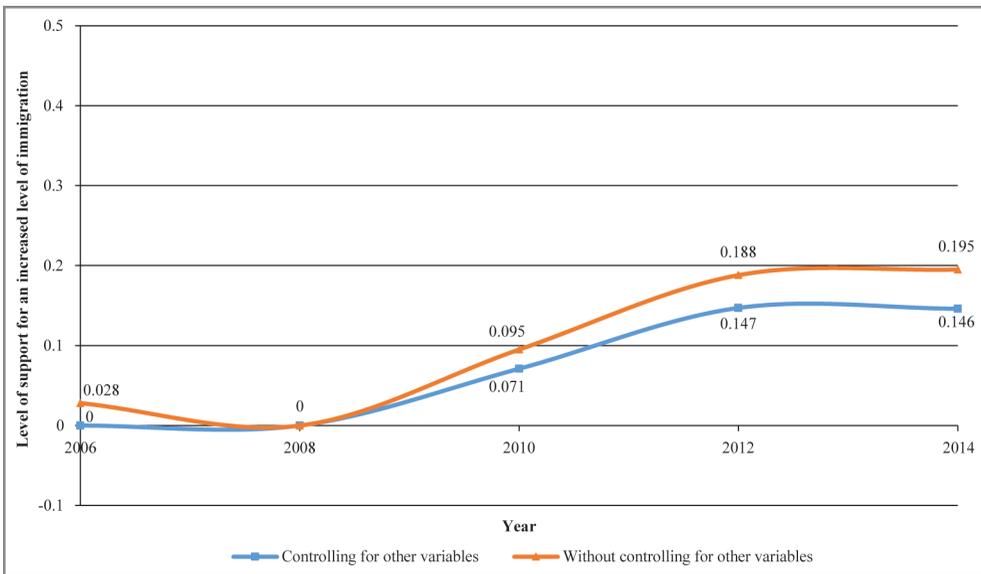


FIGURE 2. Level of support for an increased level of immigration, 2006–2014, without and with controls (Reference category = 2004).

2006–2008, but increased significantly since 2010. There is no evidence that American attitudes toward the level of immigration have turned negative in the recent years of the twenty-first century. Hence, the perception that Americans had become more negative toward immigration did not reflect real American sentiments or attitudes and may be attributed instead to the rhetoric of some politicians or political candidates and the sensational reporting of the media.

Our findings, at odds with popular belief, beg an answer to the question of why. We believe that there are two plausible and probably complementary explanations for the unexpected findings. First, the recent trends in somewhat more positive American attitudes toward the level of immigration were most likely a result of the improved United States economy after the end of the Great Recession in 2009. The economy plays a significant role in shaping American attitudes toward immigration.⁸ Existing studies have documented that when the economy is bad, Americans want to have fewer immigrants, but when the economy is good, Americans tend to welcome immigrants or have less concerns about immigration and immigrants.⁹ The 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 had a tremendous impact on the United States economy by reducing the real GDP growth rate, increasing the unemployment rate, inflicting heavy losses upon the airline industry and tourism, causing a plunge in the stock market, and negatively affecting consumer confidence. However, the impacts of the 9/11 terrorist attacks were temporary.¹⁰ The economy started to recover

8. Philip Q. Yang, “Changes in American Attitudes toward Immigrant-Native Job Competition,” *Madridge Journal of Behavioral and Social Sciences* 1, no. 2 (2017): 6–10.

9. Harwood, “American Public Opinion and US Immigration Policy;” Lapinski et al., “The Polls.”

10. Gallup Organization, “American Public Opinion about Immigration,” July 26, 2005, accessed November 28, 2017, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/14785/immigration.aspx>; Sobczak, *The New Americans*.

in 2002 and improved significantly with a GDP growth rate of 3.8 percent by 2004, the highest since 2001.¹¹ This did not last long as the United States economy turned into the Great Recession starting in 2006 as a result of the subprime mortgage crisis and culminating in 2008. This negative turn may well explain why respondents in 2006 and 2008 were not significantly different from those in 2004 in attitudes toward an increased level of immigration in the regression models. Nevertheless, after the inauguration of President Obama in January 2009 and especially after the \$787 billion Economic Stimulus Plan approved by Congress in March 2009, the recession ended in July 2009, and the United States economy gradually improved year by year after that. Not accidentally, the more positive attitudes toward the level of immigration since 2010 coincided with the end of the Great Recession.

Second, Americans have become less xenophobic over time as a result of increasing education. It is well known that Americans have become more educated over time. Fifty years ago, a typical American had a high school education. However, today a typical American has some college education. This is evident as the average schooling of our sample is 13.7 years. Education is associated with open-mindedness. More education makes Americans more tolerant toward people of other groups including immigrants and more rational in thinking about immigration. This may also help explain the more positive trend in American attitudes toward the level of immigration in recent years.

Other findings are largely consistent with those in the extant literature. For example, our finding that African Americans were more likely than whites to support an increased level of immigration is congruous with the finding of Yang's study using GSS 2000 and his minority alliance hypothesis, as well as the results of Ellison, Shin, and Leal.¹² This finding also challenges the popular perception that African Americans are not supporters of immigration because immigration hurts lower- and working-class blacks.¹³ Extending Yang's study, we also found that like African Americans, other races were more likely than whites to support an increased level of immigration.¹⁴

Our results also confirm the finding of other studies that Protestants are less likely to favor an increased level of immigration than non-Protestants.¹⁵ Our finding corroborates results of the literature that the native-born are more likely to be immigration restrictionist than the foreign-born.¹⁶ The role of education in making people less immigration

11. Yang, "Changes in American Attitudes toward Immigrant-Native Job Competition."

12. Yang, "Black-White Differential in Support for Immigration"; Christopher Ellison, Heeju Shin, and David L. Leal, "The Contact Hypothesis and Attitudes toward Latinos in the U.S.," *Social Science Quarterly* 92, no. 4 (2011): 938–58.

13. Daniel Hamermesh and Frank Bean, "Introduction," pp. 1–13 in *Help or Hindrance: The Economic Implications of Immigration for African Americans*, edited by Daniel Hamermesh and Frank Bean (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998); Thomas Muller and Thomas Espenshade, *The Fourth Wave: California's Newest Immigrants* (Washington DC: The Urban Institute Press, 1985); Roger Waldinger, "Black/Immigrant Competition Re-assessed: New Evidence from Los Angeles," *Sociological Perspectives* 40 (1997): 365–86.

14. Yang, "Black-White Differential in Support for Immigration."

15. Knoll, "And Who Is My Neighbor? Religion and Immigration Policy Attitudes"; Yang, "Black-White Differential in Support for Immigration."

16. Lyons et al., "National Identity and Group Narcissism as Predictors of Intergroup Attitudes Toward Undocumented in the United States"; Goldstein and Peters, "Nativism or Economic Threat: Attitudes Toward Immigrants During the Great Recession"; Yang, "Black-White Differential in Support for Immigration."

restrictionist that is found in existing studies is also validated.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, our result is consistent with the findings of other studies that Republicans are more likely than non-Republicans to be immigration restrictionist.¹⁸

The findings reported in this article should be cross-checked by other nationally representative samples of the United States adult population and by alternative statistical methods. Ideally, annual data instead of biennial data available in the GSS should be used if available. Additional control variables available for all years under study should be considered as well. ■

17. Espenshade and Hempstead, “Contemporary American Attitudes Toward U.S. Immigration”; Hoskin and Mishler, “Public Opinion Toward New Migrants: A Comparative”; Yang, “Black-White Differential in Support for Immigration.”

18. Max Neiman, Martin Johnson, and Shaun Bowler, “Partisanship and Views about Immigration in Southern California: Just How Partisan Is the Issue of Immigration?” *International Migration* 44, no. 2 (2006): 35–56.

