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Closing the Golden Door: Immigration in America

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A growing number of Americans feel that the "golden door" of opportunity should be closed to people seeking the opulent life in this country because the swelling population of immigrants can no longer be absorbed into either the cultural or economic fabric. Immigrants are seen as threatening, primarily in terms of economic competition.

The aspect of history that taught us that the United States was founded by immigrant families and their descendants is being replaced with an overwhelming desire to preserve America for future generations of Americans, as opposed to immigrants. Unfortunately, the idea that the population of the United States should be composed of people from all races, creeds, and countries has been tossed aside. As one survey respondent said about immigration, "I don't believe that everyone born into the world is an American who just hasn't gotten here yet, nor do I believe that everyone has a 'right' to come if they want to."

Reflecting this sentiment, 89.7% of the respondents in the 1992 American National Election Survey responded that the number of immigrants from foreign countries who are permitted to come to the United States to live should be decreased.

People support immigration restrictions and delayed access for immigrants to government services based on perceptions of immigrants' character traits and how immigrants affect various aspects of American society such as job competition and the level of taxation needed for government services. To facilitate the understanding of the relationship between perceptions of immigrant character traits, their cultural or economic impact, and support for restrictive policies concerning immigrants, it is helpful to apply Fritz Heider's Balance Theory of political perceptions. Balance Theory proposes that the attitudinal or cognitive relationship between concepts can be represented by a "P-O-X" triad. In the model, "P" represents an individual, "O" represents an object, and "X" represents an issue.

In the study of immigration, for example, "P" represents an individual citizen, "O" represents immigration restrictions, and "X" represents the perceived character traits or cultural or economic impact of immigrants (see diagram below). As the current U.S. citizen’s perception of the link between immigrants and the various character traits or cultural or economic impact changes, his evaluation of immigrants will change, thus altering his support for restrictive immigration policies (Granberg, 1993).

In this framework, the perceived work habits and perceived intelligence of immigrants can be evaluated to determine the current U.S. citizen’s support for immigration restrictions. As part of the 1992 American National Election Survey, both Hispanic immigrants and Asian immigrants were ranked on a scale from 1–7 in terms of these traits. For work habits, the scale ranged from “Lazy” (1) to “Hardworking” (7). For both groups, the percentage of respondents in favor of immigration restrictions was higher among those who considered the immigrants to be lazy. The percentage in favor of immigration restrictions decreased as the respondents viewed the groups as more hardworking (see Graph 1).

It is interesting to note that the percentage of respondents in favor of immigration restrictions is fairly similar for both groups at each level of the category “Work Habit.” Ninety-five percent of the respondents who viewed Hispanics as lazy favored immigration restrictions, while 92.3% of the respondents who viewed Asians as lazy favored immigration restrictions. Conversely, a higher percentage of respondents favored immigration restrictions for hardworking Asians than for hardworking Hispanics (89.6% in favor of restrictions for Asians, 83.3% in favor of restrictions for Hispanics at this level).

Support for immigration restrictions can also be evaluated in terms of the perceived intelligence of both groups. The scale for intelligence ranged from “Unintelligent” (1) to “Intelligent” (7). For Hispanics, the responses were fairly consistent across the entire range, with 86.7% of those who ranked Hispanics’ intelligence at level 1 favoring immigration restrictions and 84.2% of those who ranked Hispanics’ intelligence at level 7 favoring immigration restrictions. For Asians, the rankings were less consistent across the scale, with 88.9% of those who ranked Asian intelligence at level 1 favoring
immigration restrictions and 92.7% of those who ranked Asian intelligence at level 7 favoring immigration restrictions (see Graph 2).

The perception of immigrants’ impact on three aspects of society: culture, jobs currently held by U.S. workers, and taxes, provides an additional evaluation of the basis for support of restrictive immigration policies. When asked whether Hispanics or Asians would improve the American culture with their new ideas and customs, respondents to the 1992 American National Election Survey replied that they would be less supportive of immigration restrictions in cases of positive impact on American culture by Hispanic and Asian immigrants. In other words, the respondents were less opposed to immigration when immigrants were perceived to contribute positively to American culture. Survey respondents expressed greater support of immigration restrictions when a negative impact on culture was expected. In fact, 96% of the respondents who replied that Hispanics would have a negative impact on culture favored immigration restrictions. Of those who thought that Asians would have a negative impact on culture, 94.9% favored immigration restrictions. The support for immigration restrictions decreased drastically, from 96% to 72.7%, when the effects of Hispanic immigration on culture were viewed as more positive. However, support of immigration restrictions remained high regarding Asian effects on culture, even when the effects were perceived positively. Of the respondents who viewed Asian impact on culture as positive, 89.3% were still in favor of immigration restrictions (see Graph 3).
Graph 2
Support of Immigration Restrictions related to Intelligence of Hispanics and Asians

Graph 3
Support of Immigration Restrictions related to Cultural Impact of Hispanics and Asians
The data described above adheres to the tenants of Balance Theory. According to Balance Theory, if the current U.S. citizen relates positively to culture, and feels that immigrants have a positive impact on culture, then he would relate positively to immigrants, or show less support for immigration restrictions. The opposite situation can also be explained by Balance Theory. When the current U.S. citizen relates positively to culture, and feels that immigrants have a negative impact on culture, then his evaluation of immigrants is negative, or he shows higher support for immigration restrictions.

Higher support for restrictions on Asian immigration, even when their cultural impact was viewed positively, may be explained by the fact that 22.2% of those who felt that Hispanics were intelligent also felt that they would contribute positively to American culture. On the other hand, only 14.8% of those viewed Asians as intelligent thought that they would have a positive impact on culture. In addition, 14.3% of those who felt that Hispanics were hardworking also estimated that their cultural impact would be positive. Only 9.6% of those who rated Asians as hardworking thought that their cultural impact would be positive.

The expected economic impact of immigrants can be determined by examining the survey respondents' support for immigration restrictions based on the perceived impact on jobs and taxes by immigrants. The perception of job competition on support of immigration restrictions produced straightforward results. The support of immigration restrictions decreased as immigrants were perceived as less likely to take jobs from people already in the United States. For Hispanics, support for immigration restrictions dropped from 93.5%, when they were "extremely likely" to take jobs, to 60%, when they were "not at all likely to take jobs." The trend was similar for Asians. Support for immigration restrictions fell from 93.7% when severe job impact was expected to 63.8% when minimal job impact was expected (see Graph 4).

Evaluating this data shows that the support of immigration restrictions related to job impact of Hispanics and Asians follows the patterns predicted by Balance Theory. When the current U.S. citizen feels positively towards jobs currently held by U.S. citizens, and feels that immigrants will have a negative impact on these jobs, he feels negatively towards immigrants. His evaluation of immigrants is expressed through his higher support of immigration restrictions when immigrants are perceived to have a negative impact on jobs.

In this case, assuming that hardworking immigrants have a greater impact on the jobs of U.S. workers, the higher support for immigration restrictions on Asians can be attributed to the fact that 22.2% of those who felt that Asians were hardworking also felt that they would be "extremely likely" to take jobs from people already in the United States. Only 18.9% of those who felt that Hispanics were hardworking also felt that they would be "extremely likely" to take the jobs of U.S. workers. Thus, the respondents viewed hardworking Asians as more economically threatening through job competition than hardworking Hispanics.

The trends associated with support of immigration restrictions related
Support of Immigration Restrictions related to Job Impact of Hispanics and Asians

Graph 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% in Favor of Immigration Restrictions</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Positive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanics</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asians</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>63.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Balance Theory can also explain the perceived impact of the immigrant groups on taxes, assuming that current U.S. citizens are generally opposed to tax increases. When the U.S. citizen feels that an increase in taxes is bad, and that immigrants will raise taxes, he feels negatively toward immigrants and shows higher support for immigration restrictions. Conversely, when the current U.S. citizen feels that an increase in taxes is a negative concept, but that immigrants will have a positive effect on taxes (they will not raise taxes), he feels more positively toward immigrants and shows less support for immigration restrictions.

Support of policies that would delay access (available to immigrants) to government services such as Food Stamps, Medicaid, and Welfare can also be
viewed as support for restrictive immigration policies. Overall, 78.9% of the respondents to the 1992 American National Election Survey favored delaying access to these government services for one year or more. Requiring immigrants to wait at least a year or more for access to these government services could be interpreted as a punitive action. Evaluation of the respondents’ support of delayed access was achieved through looking at the same two behavioral characteristics that were previously discussed: perceived work habits and intelligence of immigrants.

The support of delayed access decreased as immigrants were perceived as more hardworking. For Hispanics, 88% of the respondents supported delayed access when they viewed immigrants as lazy and 65.7% were in favor of delayed access when they viewed immigrants as hardworking. For Asians, 89.2% of the respondents favored delayed access for lazy immigrants, while 72.1% of the respondents supported delayed access for hardworking immigrants (see Graph 6).

Support for delayed access to government services actually increased when Asian immigrants were characterized as intelligent. When describing Asians as intelligent, 77.3% of the respondents favored delayed access, while only 73.1% of the respondents favored delayed access for Asian immigrants when they were characterized as unintelligent. In contrast, support of delayed access for immigrants declined when Hispanics were characterized as intelligent. When Hispanics were classified as unintelligent, 76.2% of the respondents were in favor of delayed access, while only 69.6% who viewed Hispanics as intelligent favored delayed access (see Graph 7).
Graph 6
Support of Delayed Access to Government Services related to Work Habits of Hispanics and Asians

Graph 7
Support of Delayed Access to Government Services related to Intelligence of Hispanics and Asians
When the respondents to the 1992 American National Election Survey felt the effects of Hispanics on American culture would be negative, 85.6% said that access should be delayed. This figure improved to 68.8% support for delayed access when the effects of Hispanic immigrants on American culture were viewed as positive. A similar trend appeared during the evaluation of Asian cultural impact. Of the respondents, 83.5% supported delayed access with negative cultural impact, while only 65.6% favored delayed access when the cultural impact was expected to be positive (see Graph 8).

Balance Theory can be used to explain the decrease in support of delayed access to government services. When the current U.S. citizen feels positively toward American culture, and feels that immigrants will have a negative impact on this culture, the current U.S. citizen feels negatively toward immigrants and shows greater support of delayed access. On the other hand, when the current U.S. citizen feels positively toward American culture, and thinks that immigrants will have a positive impact as a result of contributions to American culture, he will feel positive toward immigrants and be less supportive of delayed access.

Assuming that hardworking people would have a more positive impact on culture than lazy people, the higher support of delayed access to government services for Hispanics can be explained in terms of the relationship between perceived work habit and cultural impact. Of the respondents who viewed Hispanics as hardworking, 22.9% felt that they would still have a

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**Graph 8**

**Support of Delayed Access to Government Services related to Cultural Impact of Hispanics and Asians**

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57
negative impact on culture, while only 15.8% of those who felt that Asians were hardworking expected their cultural impact to be negative.

Perceived job impact again played an important role in determining support for a delayed access policy concerning immigrants. Support for delayed access to government services dropped from 86.6% to 67.5% for Hispanics as they were viewed as "extremely likely" to take jobs from current U.S. workers to "not at all likely" to take those jobs. Support for delayed access for Asians fell from 83.8% to 70.4% for the same categories (see Graph 9).

Once again, this trend can be explained through the application of Balance Theory. When the current U.S. citizen feels positively about jobs held by U.S. workers, and thinks that immigrants will take these jobs, he has a negative evaluation of immigrants and is more supportive of delayed access. Conversely, when the current U.S. citizen feels positively about jobs held by U.S. workers and thinks that immigrants do not pose a threat to these jobs, he feels more positively toward immigrants and offers less support of delayed access for immigrants.

Higher support of delayed access for Asians than for Hispanics can be attributed to the fact that hardworking Asians are seen as a bigger threat to the jobs of U.S. workers than hardworking Hispanics. Only 18.9% of those who felt that Hispanics were hardworking felt that they would be "extremely likely" to take jobs from U.S. workers, but 22.2% of those who felt that Asians

Graph 9
Support of Delayed Access to Government Services related to Job Impact of Hispanics and Asians

![Graph 9](image_url)
were hardworking also felt that they would be "extremely likely" to take the jobs of U.S. workers.

There was more support for delayed access to government services when immigrants' impact on taxes were expected to be negative. For Hispanics, 84.8% of the respondents supported delayed access when expecting a negative impact. This number dropped to 67.3% when a positive impact was projected. For Asians, the support of delayed access fell from 83.1% to 73.3% as the impact on taxes grew more positive (see Graph 10).

The perceived effects of immigrants on taxes can be explained by Balance Theory. When the current U.S. citizen is opposed to higher taxes and thinks that immigrants cause higher taxes, he will be opposed to immigrants and show higher support for delayed access for immigrants to government services. On the other hand, when the current U.S. citizen is opposed to higher taxes and thinks that immigrants do not cause higher taxes, he will be more tolerant of immigrants and show less support of delayed access for immigrants to government services.

While Balance Theory has been useful in understanding which perceptions contribute to the support of restrictive immigration policies, it cannot determine the origin of these perceptions. One interpretation is that the current U.S. citizen forms his opinions based on a rational response to a threat to his or her personal well-being. Another perspective is that the perceived threat itself is irrational, based primarily on racism and prejudice. Balance Theory has been useful in understanding which perceptions contribute to the support of restrictive immigration policies, it cannot determine the origin of these perceptions. One interpretation is that the current U.S. citizen forms his opinions based on a rational response to a threat to his or her personal well-being. Another perspective is that the perceived threat itself is irrational, based primarily on racism and prejudice.

**Graph 10**

Support of Delayed Access to Government Services related to Tax Impact of Hispanics and Asians
Theory makes no provisions for determining which interpretation should be applied in this case.

The immigration issue extends beyond the crude determination of how many immigrants should be permitted to enter the United States every year. The American public is concerned about the impact that immigrants have on jobs, culture, and taxes in American society. Consequently, people are strongly in favor of policies aimed at immigration restrictions and delaying access for immigrants to government services when immigrants are perceived as taking jobs away from American workers, having a negative impact on American culture, and raising taxes to handle the demand for increased social services for immigrants. Americans seem intent on preserving their country from immigrants who seek to overpopulate the cities and overcrowd the schools. The benefits that immigrants bring with them, such as knowledge and diversity, are forgotten in light of these seemingly more pertinent economic and cultural concerns.

Sources Consulted


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