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# Attitudes towards Immigration Reform in the United States: The Importance of Neighborhoods

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Noelle Makhoul, FCRH 2012, is from Fort Lee, New Jersey. She is a psychology and political science major. After graduation, Noelle plans on attending Officer Candidate School for the United States Army and then later completing a graduate degree.

# Attitudes towards Immigration Reform in the United States:

## The Importance of Neighborhoods

Noelle Makhoul, FCRH '12

Americans are greatly divided over immigration reform. Public opinion literature provides multiple explanations for these attitudinal differences. One contention in the literature is that the amount of ethnic diversity in one's neighborhood affects mass attitudes towards immigration reform. Within this literature, some scholars argue that ethnic diversity triggers more negative attitudes towards immigration. Others posit that ethnic diversity is associated with positive attitudes towards immigration. In this paper, I seek to contribute to this debate by exploring the role of ethnic diversity in one's neighborhood in shaping public attitudes toward immigration reform. This study is based upon semi-structured interviews with thirteen human subjects conducted in November 2010. The results reveal that individuals residing in ethnically homogenous towns are more likely to support a more liberal immigration reform. These results advance our understanding of how exposure to ethnic diversity influences attitudes towards immigration. These findings provide policymakers with some insights into how to build public support for immigration reform in various neighborhoods.

### Introduction

In 2010, Americans ranked immigration fourth among the most important problems facing the United States (Morales, 2010). Immigrants from around the world choose to settle down in the United States in pursuit of something that their home country could not offer. However, not all US-born Americans appreciate the influx of immigrants. Consequently, there is a constant debate in the policymaking community about the extent to which the United States should "open its doors" to foreigners. On one hand, some analysts fear that excessive immigration may have detrimental effects on the economy. According to the Center of Immigration Studies, the fiscal cost of unskilled immigrants is estimated to be anywhere from 11 to 22 billion dollars a year, which offsets any economic gains from access to immigrant labor (Camarota, 2003). On the other hand, others claim that the American work force cannot function without immigrants. The American Immigration Law Foundation (2002), for example, concluded that Mexican immigration is integral to economic growth. Public opinion plays a prominent role in this debate over immigration reform. Most US-born Americans

are able to relate their family history to immigration. Yet, many of them are unwilling to embrace the idea of continuous immigration.

Why are some individuals more likely to favor a less restrictive immigration reform than others? This paper seeks to answer this question by exploring the significance of neighborhoods in shaping attitudes toward immigration reform. The findings suggest that individuals residing in ethnically homogenous towns, compared to those in ethnically diverse towns, are more likely to support the implementation of an immigration policy aimed at increasing the number of legal immigrants. The data from semi-structured interviews indicate that individuals residing in ethnically diverse towns developed a sense of frustration with immigrants, while those without much firsthand contact with immigrants held more accepting views towards immigrants. This study seeks to contribute to existing literature by illuminating citizens' reasoning behind their attitudes toward immigration reform.

In this paper, the key terms are defined in the following manner. The term *immigration* is used to describe le-

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gal immigration as opposed to illegal immigration. In addition, the term *liberal immigration reform* refers to an overall increase in the amount of immigrants who are allowed to enter the country legally and are granted citizenship. The word *native* describes anyone who was born in the United States. Finally, the phrase *ethnically homogenous town* refers to towns that are mainly composed of Caucasians and towns that have a small percentage of recent immigrants.

This paper proceeds as follows: The first section discusses current debates in the literature on attitudes towards immigration reform. The second section describes the research methodology and socio-demographic background of the respondents. The third section presents the empirical findings. The paper concludes by specifying policymaking implications of these findings and pointing out limitations of this research.

### Theoretical Background

Over the past four decades, scholars have analyzed the role of economic, political, and cultural factors in explaining support for immigration reform (Espenshade & Hempstead, 1995; Fenelley & Federico, 2007; Wilkes et al., 2008). Numerous attempts have been made to test the effects of education, income, ideology, party affiliation, and culture on attitudes toward immigration. In recent years, the impact of contact with minorities has attracted academic attention. Yet, this research has produced mixed results.

In the 1970s and the 1980s, researchers devoted considerable attention to the impact of economic factors on support for immigration reform (e.g., LeVine & Campbell, 1972). Neorestrictionism emerged in the United States during that period because of concerns with the state of the economy. Proponents of the neorestrictionist view argued that the biggest problem caused by immigrants was economic in nature. A major concern was that immigrants would take jobs away from natives, contributing to a greater level of unemployment. In support of this view, Mayda (2006), for example, finds that the state of a country's national economy and immigrant-to-native skill ratio influenced attitudes toward immigration. A related argument in the literature is that income and education are positively related to tolerant attitudes towards immigration. According to the labor market competition hypothesis, most of complaints about the influx of immigrants are made by individuals at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, because low-skill and low-wage native workers have

occupational characteristics similar to those of today's new immigrants (Abowd & Freeman, 1991; Borjas & Freeman, 1992; Espenshade & Hempstead; 1995 Simon, 1987). This threat may exist only for certain subgroups, which, as a result, makes it harder to capture empirically (Ayers et al., 2009).

By the same token, previous research suggests racial undertones in attitudes toward immigration policy (Ayers et al., 2009; Dustmann & Preston, 2004). According to the ideological model, attitudes about immigration are driven by racism (Wilkes et al., 2008). Ayers et al., (2009) argues that immigration policy preferences are strongly influenced by racial resentment toward the racial groups of incoming immigrants. Similarly, Lovemann and Hofstretter (1972) conclude that certain ethnicities, such as Latinos, are perceived as undesirable in comparison to European immigrants.

In addition, the role of cultural factors has recently attracted academic attention. The cultural affinity hypothesis states that individuals who have close cultural ties as well as ethnic ties to their home country would be more likely to favor liberal immigration policies (Espenshade & Hempstead, 1995). In addition, those who have close relatives in other countries, especially relatives who would like to come to the United States, are more likely to support a more lenient immigration policy. For instance, Espenshade and Hempstead (1995) find that Hispanic, African Americans, and Asian Americans are more likely to be pro-immigration than non-Hispanic whites.

In contrast, the contextual interaction hypothesis focuses on proximity to minorities. Past studies have assumed that contact with minorities mitigates prejudice because prejudices are based on easily falsified beliefs (Allport, 1954; Ayers et al., 2009). According to Allport (1954), when groups are of equal status and when contact receives support from authority figures and the greater society, inter-group hostility is lessened. In addition, the greater heterogeneity of certain geographic areas is often associated with greater tolerance of diversity (Fennelly & Federico, 2007). It is assumed that contact with minority groups in neighborhoods facilitate social bonds and may introduce common goals between members of different ethnic groups.

Social bonds are critical to explaining immigration attitudes. Researchers find that individual contact with minorities reduces the approval of the deportation of

immigrants (Ayers et al., 2009; McLaren 2003). In addition, empirical evidence indicates that living in areas with concentrations of Latinos and Asians is associated with more liberal stances on immigration among native residents (Ayers et al., 2009; Hood & Morris, 1997). Some studies that employ direct measures of contact with immigrants show that individuals with low contact are more likely to support restrictive immigration policies (Fennelly & Federico, 2007). This adds to the idea that individuals living in ethnically diverse areas who encounter immigrants frequently are likely to support a more liberal immigration reform.

However, recent empirical evidence challenges the validity of the contextual interaction argument. A study conducted by Ayers et al. (2009) concludes that living in neighborhoods with larger Latino concentrations decreased support of immigration. In addition, those living close to the Mexican border, such as in Texas or California, are more likely to support more restrictive immigration policies than Americans living in other parts of the country (Fennelly & Federico, 2007). Some researchers advance a realistic group conflict theory to explain why increased proximity to migrants may cause more negative attitudes towards immigrants. It is assumed that increased proximity may amplify ideological and material competition, which can accentuate divisions (Ayers et al., 2009; LeVine & Campbell, 1972). In other words, individuals may be more prone to reject a liberal immigration reform to protect their own beliefs and status. Negative sentiments regarding immigration can be understood as a defensive reaction to competition (Espenshade & Hempstead, 1995).

This study seeks to engage in this debate by examining how ethnic diversity in one's neighborhood shapes individual attitudes towards immigration. Although some research has been conducted on this topic, it is still debatable in the literature. This article aims to contribute to the literature by providing evidence that ethnic diversity in one's neighborhood is an important factor in determining attitudes towards immigration reform.

## Methodology

In order to understand how ethnic diversity in one's neighborhood impacts attitudes toward immigration, I conducted semi-structured interviews with human subjects. According to Wengraf (2001), "semi-structured interviews are designed to have a number of interviewer questions prepared in advance but such pre-

pared questions are designed to be sufficiently open that the subsequent questions of the interviewer cannot be planned in advance but must be improvised in a careful and theorized way." The advantage of this research method is that it allows new questions to be developed throughout the interview. Written questionnaires, consisting mainly of close-ended questions, place constraints on the quality of data that could be collected for they prevent the use of follow-up questions. Quite often, however, respondents are hesitant to answer certain questions. In this study, this was especially true for the questions pertaining to the potential job losses as a result of immigration. Therefore, in these instances, it was necessary to use follow-up questions to collect additional data, which is not typically allowed in written questionnaires. Because semi-structured interviews allow for a more "open" interview process, they are best suited to answer my research question.

The convenience sample was drawn. Thirteen individuals were interviewed in November 2010. The first five interviewees referred me to the remaining eight participants in the study. All of the participants were, at least, first generation Americans and had basic knowledge about their ethnic background. They were between the ages of 18 and 22. Five of them were female. Six of the interviewees identified themselves with the Republican Party, the other six with the Democratic Party, and one respondent was not affiliated with any particular party. They were full-time students enrolled at Fordham University, New York University, Montclair State University, and Rutgers University. Many of the participants attended school in New York City and therefore were familiar with the locale. Most of the participants permanently resided on the East Coast, and one individual resided on the West Coast.

The sample included seven individuals who resided in such ethnically diverse towns as Fort Lee, NJ; La Habra, CA; Miami, FL; and New York City. According to the census data, Fort Lee, New Jersey has the following ethnic composition: 62.8% Whites (7.9% - Hispanic), 31.4% Asian Americans, 1.7% African Americans (United States Census, 2010). The census data also confirm the racial and ethnic diversity of the other cities. The ethnic composition of La Habra is 63.0% Whites, 5.9% Asian-Americans, and 49% of La Habra's population reported that they were of Hispanic descent. In Miami, Florida, 65.8% of the population reported that they were of Hispanic descent. Finally, the population of New York City, which was listed as a city of residence by one participant, consists of 44.7% Whites,

26.6% African Americans, and 9.8% Asian Americans. Of all New Yorkers, 27.0% are of Hispanic descent.

The remaining six individuals claimed that they lived in an ethnically homogenous, predominantly Caucasian town. One respondent, for example, resided in Newton, New Hampshire where the majority of the population, 96.2%, was white. Only 1.7% of the city's population consisted of Asian Americans, and 2.2% were of Hispanic descent (United States Census, 2010).

In sum, the interview process consisted of approximately twenty open-ended questions (for a list of questions, see the Appendix). The interviews lasted from twenty to thirty minutes.

### Findings

Based on the data from semi-structured interviews, this study challenged the assumption that individuals living in ethnically diverse towns are more likely to support a more liberal immigration reform than individuals living in ethnically homogenous, predominantly Caucasian, towns. A close analysis of the participants' responses revealed why such a trend was observed in the sample.

The results indicated that the respondents had some common understanding of the key terms. When the interviewees were asked to define the term *immigrant*, the common response was "somebody who moves to another country from his or her homeland." Such initial responses, however, lacked any indication of how the respondents felt about immigrants.

Upon further probing, the findings revealed variations in attitudes toward immigration. When presented with the question "Do you support immigration?" all the respondents residing in ethnically homogenous towns answered in the positive, without any qualifications. In contrast, the respondents who resided in ethnically diverse towns expressed more skepticism about the ongoing influx of immigrants. One respondent from La Habra, California, an ethnically diverse area with a high percentage of Mexican, as well as other Latino, immigrants stated, "I think everyone deserves a chance; however, I support immigration to a limited extent" (Subject 6). This individual lived in La Habra for his whole life. In addition, he is considered a second-generation American, being that his father is a Canadian immigrant.<sup>1</sup> Yet, his place of residence and family back-

ground failed to produce the strong endorsement of liberal immigration policies. Another respondent from Fort Lee, an ethnically diverse town in New Jersey, reported lukewarm support for immigration: "It kind of bothers me, because the immigrants in my town hate everyone but themselves" (Subject 8). This participant also noted that she is a third-generation American with the majority of her family emigrating from Europe. The findings suggested that neighborhoods have a more pronounced effect on support for a less restrictive immigration policy than a recent record of immigration in the family histories of these participants.

Furthermore, this study found that the respondents living in ethnically diverse towns were likely to support a more selective process in allowing immigrants to enter the country. One respondent living in an ethnically diverse town consisting of many recent immigrants stated, "I support [a less restrictive] immigration reform. However, those who legally enter the country should be allowed to do so based on how qualified they are to live here" (Subject 4). Another respondent residing in an ethnically diverse town stated:

*It depends. I do support [a more liberal] immigration reform but other reforms need to come with it. If a greater amount of individuals were to enter the country, I wouldn't mind but the fact is, we need to maintain our "American" identity. By this, I mean that in areas concentrated with different ethnic groups, it is important to respect their cultures while maintaining certain standards, such as English taking precedence over other languages. Too frequently our national language is superseded by different languages (Subject 8).*

These findings challenged the contextual interaction hypothesis. If contact with minorities and greater heterogeneity in one's neighborhood is supposed to account for a greater tolerance of diversity, then individuals living in ethnically diverse towns would be more prone to support immigration without qualifications, for immigration increases ethnic diversity. Yet, this assumption did not hold. Instead, the findings supported the hypothesis that increased proximity to minorities is associated with more restrictive attitudes towards immigration. One explanation for this trend is provided by realistic group conflict theory, stating that increased proximity to minorities may increase material and ideological competition.

<sup>1</sup> Second-generation American refers to "the children of contemporary immigrants" (Zhou, 1997, p. 64)

The survey data lend support to the realistic group conflict theory. The respondent (Subject 8), who resided in a very ethnically diverse neighborhood with a large number of recent immigrants and first generation Americans, pointed out that she was bothered by the amount of recent immigrants in her neighborhood. According to Subject 8, the recent immigrants in her residence “hate anybody who is not them.” In addition, this respondent expressed the belief that the “American” identity was suppressed due to immigration. On numerous occasions, the respondent mentioned the unwillingness of immigrants to assimilate as a reason for her lack of support for immigration thus supporting the theoretical argument about the significance of ideological competition. Additional support for realistic group conflict theory is provided by data from the interview with the respondent from La Habra. He specifically stated that he “did not want too many people to come in” and expressed a concern with overpopulation. Excessive crowding in one area could cause material competition amongst individuals for certain resources, such land and public housing, thus creating conflict between groups. Therefore, this respondent’s concern with overpopulation parallels with the idea set forth by realistic group conflict theory.

Next, the findings indicated that those who resided in an ethnically homogenous town were more likely to support a less restrictive immigration reform. One respondent, from Newton, New Hampshire, stated that he was in favor of immigration because his “ancestors were all immigrants” (Subject 1). When this individual was further questioned about his ethnic background, he had difficulty tracking his origins to any specific ethnic group. Instead, he proudly stated that he was American. As a resident of Newton, he correctly estimated the percentage of immigrants in his town. He also noted that he did not have much interaction with them. Another individual from an ethnically homogenous town stated that he “would like to see less restrictions on immigration” (Subject 3). As a high school student, he went to a private preparatory school where the student population was quite homogenous. This respondent also stated that he had descendents from Ireland but overall, very little contact with recent immigrants. The findings from individuals residing in ethnically homogenous towns showed that the dearth of contact with recent immigrants fostered favorable attitudes toward immigration.

Turning to the influx of immigrants to a specific locale, the study gauged the respondents’ feelings toward the

number of immigrants in New York City. The results showed that all the respondents, despite their attitudes towards immigration as a whole, expressed positive feelings about the number of immigrants in the city. In part, these findings derive from the fact that the respondents were shielded from the regular interaction with immigrants due to their university experience. On campus, students mostly socialized other with U.S.-born students. It must be noted that only one of the respondents actually resided in New York City, while other participants only made frequent trips to the city. However, this individual stated that she spent most of her formative years in South Korea, an ethnically homogenous country. This suggests that when individuals are not directly and constantly exposed to a large number of immigrants, they are more likely to express positive sentiments towards the idea of immigration. Even individuals who were skeptical about immigration in general did not express the same level of skepticism when describing their feelings about immigrants in New York City. Thus, increased proximity to immigrants, such as residing in ethnically diverse towns, does not make individuals more prone to support diversity caused by immigration.

In sum, the empirical evidence derived from semi-structured interviews challenged the argument that ethnic diversity in one’s neighborhood promotes support for more liberal immigration reform. The findings showed that respondents from ethnically homogenous towns who did not have a lot of contact with recent immigrants were more likely to support liberal immigration policies.

### Conclusion

The findings supported the argument that individuals who reside in ethnically homogenous towns are more likely to support liberal immigration reform than individuals who reside in ethnically heterogeneous towns. The results showed that respondents from ethnically diverse towns were more likely to place restrictions on immigration, indicating their skepticism about the positive effects of increased immigration. The empirical evidence documenting that individuals within the physical proximity to immigrants appeared to be somewhat intolerant of such diversity suggested that the contextual interaction hypothesis did not hold. In contrast, these findings provided empirical evidence in support of the realistic group conflict theory.

Since the main issue underlying realistic group conflict

theory is ideological and material competition, policy-makers might reduce the magnitude of such competition by fostering dialogue among recent immigrants and US-born Americans. In particular, educators can raise students' awareness of multiple effects of immigration on their communities and create opportunities for students' exposure to ethnic and racial diversity in their neighborhoods. At Fordham, for example, courses with a service learning component can bring students closer to the neighborhoods in which they reside. On a macroeconomic level, to remedy such intolerance of immigration, the government could allocate more funding to provide education and jobs to recent immigrants. When immigrants are of the same status as natives and are driven to reach common goals, natives are more likely to accept the idea of immigration.

This study has some limitations. The sample consisted of only college-aged students, which is not representative of the general population. This is especially problematic because older individuals tend to have more conservative views on immigration which could have provided more data on attitudes towards immigration reform. In addition, the convenience sample was quite small. Only 13 individuals were interviewed, which does not allow me to make generalizations about the student population in the United States. Further research is necessary to arrive at stronger conclusions about the effects of ethnic diversity in one's neighborhood on attitudes toward immigration.

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Appendix. Question Wording

- How old are you?
- Political Party Affiliation: Which political party do you identify with?
- Residence (City, State): Where do you live?
- Could you describe the neighborhood in which you grew up?
- What type of setting is it?
- Have you lived there your whole life?
- How ethnically diverse is it?
- Do a lot of recent immigrants or first generation Americans live in that neighborhood?
- How do you feel about the number of immigrants in your neighborhood?
- Define the word "Immigrant."
- Do you agree with the idea that immigrants take away jobs?
- Do you support the idea of immigration?
- What is your level of support for immigration reform? Why?
- How do you feel about the number of immigrants in NYC?
- How do you feel about the Arizona Laws?
- Hypothetically speaking, if you were elected into political office, what would your political stance be about immigration?
- Can you state your ethnic background?
- Which generation are you?

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