

Sociologist Asks What It Means to be American

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How would you define an American? According to a new Purdue University study, more than 94 percent would say that having United States citizenship makes someone "truly American."

"Most other qualities considered typically American tend to be about behavior, things you can change," says Jeremy Straughn, the assistant sociology professor who designed the study.

Besides citizenship, more than 90 percent reported that speaking and writing English well and a willingness to pledge allegiance to the flag are important in defining someone as truly American. Nearly 80 percent thought that serving in the military is important, and 76 percent said that having an education and training also matters.

The study found that, in general, voluntary behaviors are considered more important than qualities that are beyond an individual's control, like birth or lifetime residence in the United States or being of European descent. These qualities were considered necessary to be truly American by 71 percent and 30 percent, respectively. One exception is religion, Straughn says. When asked if Christian faith makes someone truly American, 54 percent agreed (39 percent did so strongly), but 32 percent strongly disagreed, reflecting a deep division over the role of religion in defining American culture.

Straughn interviewed more than 1,500 adult U.S. citizens between August and January. Conducted by telephone through Purdue's Social

Research Institute, the survey included 120 items.

The survey found that most of the same qualities for being truly American also apply when deciding to grant U.S. citizenship to someone from another country.

"What this means is that Americans will tolerate or even welcome immigrants as long as they show loyalty to this country and behave like the Americans already here," Straughn says. "Where newcomers were born or how long they've lived here is secondary."

Eighty-six percent feel that immigrants make the United States more open to new ideas and cultures, while about the same proportion believe it is better if different groups adapt and blend into the larger community.

Although the survey did not ask specifically about illegal immigration, it is clear that Americans are divided over how to deal with those who come here unlawfully, Straughn says.

"For some people, illegal workers have already violated the law from day one and just shouldn't be rewarded for it," he says. "For others, the fact that our economy relies on these workers makes them legitimate, even if the law doesn't recognize them as such."

The survey also found deep differences over what makes someone a patriotic citizen in a time of war.

"There are certainly different philosophies about the meaning of patriotism and the ways people interpret the duties of citizens in a time of war, and these perspectives can also change over time," Straughn says.

"The rift in public opinion about war in Iraq goes deeper than partisan loyalties alone and may, in turn, reflect differences in how party

supporters interpret the rights and duties of citizens in a time of war. As compared with Democratic supporters, those leaning toward the Republicans adhere to unconditional patriotism, with 88 percent agreeing that "When our leaders take the country to war, it is our duty as citizens to support their decision."

Only 46 percent of Democratic supporters agree with that statement, while 54 percent strongly disagree. In contrast, 93 percent of respondents leaning toward the Democrats embrace a philosophy of critical patriotism, which sees criticizing the government as a civic duty, even in wartime.

But support for the war in Iraq has eroded among unconditional patriots due to information that came to light only after the initial invasion, Straughn says.

Three out of five of those interviewed in Straughn's survey agree that "Based on what we knew at the time, invading Iraq in 2003 was the right thing to do." But almost a quarter of those who agreed at the time say they now disagree with the invasion based on what is publicly known today.

Straughn, whose research is supported by the College of Liberal Arts and the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, continues to analyze the survey responses. The survey's margin of error was 2 percentage points, and all participants were U.S. citizens older than 18. The sampling procedure used random digit dialing, which gives all households with a phone line an approximately equal probability of being selected.

Source: Purdue University

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