What do Americans think about immigrants?

So far, we've been talking about who immigrants are and how they came to the United States. Now we'll turn to what Americans think about immigrants and immigration policy, and how their views have changed over time.

One major change in recent decades: Americans’ views about immigrants have become more positive overall, but Democrats increasingly have more favorable views than Republicans. White Americans and older Americans, who are more likely to vote Republican, tilt positive but by smaller margins than Americans of other races and those who are younger.
Growing share say immigrants strengthen the U.S.

Democrats have grown more likely to say immigrants strengthen the U.S., while Republicans’ views are little changed.

For more than two decades, Pew Research Center has asked Americans whether they think immigrants have a positive or negative impact on the country. In 2017, 65% of the public said immigrants strengthen the country with their hard work and talents, compared with 26% who said they burden the country by taking jobs, housing and health care. That was a more positive assessment than at any point in the past two decades.

In 1994, far more Americans thought immigrants had a negative impact than a positive one, but opinion has slowly shifted in the opposite direction. Since 2012, more Americans have had a positive view of immigrants than a negative view. This shift has largely been driven by more positive views among Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents, who are now twice as likely as Republicans and Republican leaners to say immigrants strengthen the U.S.

Many incorrectly believe the majority of U.S. immigrants are unauthorized.

Fewer than half of Americans surveyed in 2018 know that most immigrants in the U.S. are here legally. A similar share incorrectly say unauthorized immigrants were either the majority of immigrants or that half of immigrants were in the U.S. legally and half illegally. A smaller share say they don’t know.

Legal immigrants have been the majority of all U.S. immigrants in Pew Research Center estimates going back to 1990. In 2015, unauthorized immigrants were a quarter of all immigrants.
Most who interact with immigrants who speak little or no English are not bothered by this.

About three-quarters of Americans say they often or sometimes come in contact with immigrants who speak little or no English, about the same as in 2006. Among those who do, 26% say this bothers them, less than the 38% who said so in 2006.

On the broader topic of assimilation, most people say that today’s immigrants are either about as willing to adapt or more willing to adapt to the American way of life compared with immigrants who came to this country in the early 1900s. Fewer (36%) say they are less willing.

Americans are divided about what to do about legal immigration.

Public support for increasing legal immigration has nearly doubled since 2006.

When asked about whether the level of legal immigration into the U.S. should change, 38% of Americans in 2018 said legal immigration should be kept at its present level, while 32% said it should be increased and 24% said it should be decreased. Public support for expanding legal immigration has grown since 2001, while support for decreasing it has fallen.

There is a substantial divide in these views by party. Democrats and independents who lean Democratic are more likely to support an increase than a decrease, and their support for expansion is up dramatically. Republicans and Republican leaners are more likely to support a decrease than an increase, but support for expansion has edged up over time.
Most agree on what to do about immigrants in the country illegally.

About three-quarters of Americans said in 2015 that undocumented immigrants should be allowed to stay in the country legally if certain requirements are met, little changed from previous years. Asked whether those immigrants should be allowed to apply for citizenship, or for permanent residency but not citizenship, almost twice as many Americans favored a path to citizenship.

Majorities of the public also say that unauthorized immigrants mostly fill jobs that American citizens do not want, and that unauthorized immigrants are no more likely than American citizens to commit serious crimes.

Republicans and Democrats disagree on whether the U.S. has a responsibility to accept refugees.

There has been public debate in the past about whether the U.S. should admit refugees, and today there is a substantial gap by party on this issue. In a 2018 survey, 51% said the U.S. has a responsibility to accept refugees, and 43% said it does not. While most Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents say the U.S. has a responsibility to accept refugees, most Republicans and Republican leaners say the nation does not have a responsibility.

Last updated July 2019