



CIRCLE

The Center for Information & Research on
Civic Learning & Engagement

Attitudes of Young People Toward Diversity

By Michael Olander, Research Assistant, Emily Hoban Kirby, Research Associate, and Krista Schmitt, Research Assistant¹

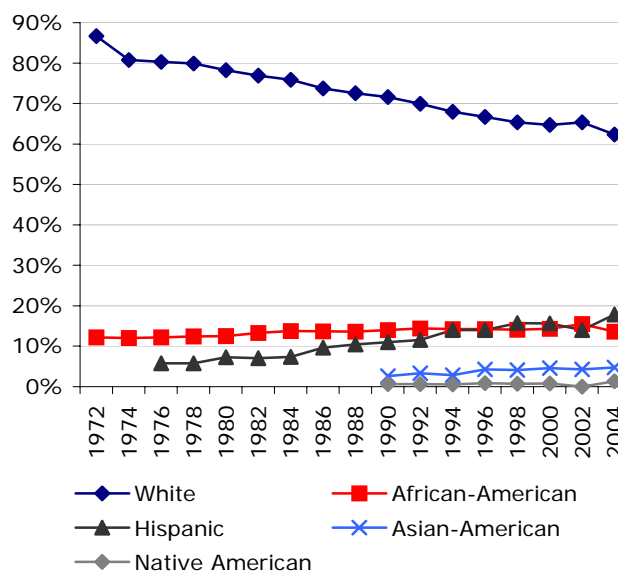
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Over the past fifty years, the population of the United States has become progressively more diverse. This is especially true of young people. For example, since 1976 the percentage of Hispanic youth (age 18-24) has grown by ten points (see Graph 1).

This trend is reflected in the electorate as well. According to the 2004 National Election Pool (NEP) exit polls, thirteen percent of young voters (ages 18-29) classified themselves as Hispanic/Latino, larger than the proportion in the electorate as a whole (8%). Fifteen percent of young voters self-identified as Black, compared to 11% of all voters. Six percent identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, compared to 3% of the whole electorate. As the size of minority groups grows and increases in political strength, issues of acceptance among Americans are increasingly important to our polity.

This fact sheet summarizes young people's attitudes toward three groups that are sometimes targets of intolerance: gays, immigrants, and racial minorities. In general, the data show that young Americans are the most tolerant age group and are growing more tolerant over time. However, their social circles and voluntary associations (such as churches and other religious congregations) remain largely segregated by race.

Graph 1: Growing Racial and Ethnic Composition of Young People Ages 18-24, 1972 to 2004



Source: Current Population Survey, November Supplements, 1972-2002, and March 2004 Current Population Annual Demographic File.

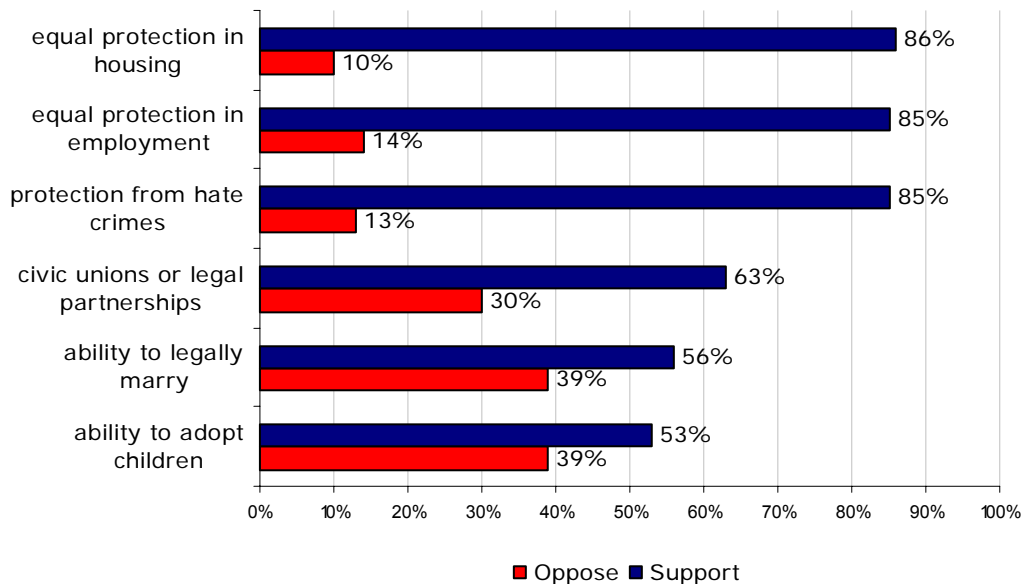
Attitudes towards Homosexuality by Age

In 2004, a survey by the Council for Excellence in Government (CEG) and CIRCLE asked 15 to 25 year olds a series of questions regarding the rights of homosexuals. These questions ranged from whether gay and lesbian people were entitled to equal protection in housing to whether they needed protection against hate crimes. They also included statements about job discrimination and the right to adopt. When compared to National Election Study (NES) data from 2000 (see Graph 3), it appears that youth are much more likely to support equal protection for employment. The final two questions asked about a current political question – the legality of civil unions and marriage. As Graph 2 shows, a majority of youth support both civil unions and gay marriage, though civil unions find more support.²

The survey also found that youth attitudes towards extending equal protections to gays differ by race/ethnicity. African American and Latino youth are more supportive of laws that provide equal protections on housing, employment, and hate crimes than whites. And majorities of these young people support civil unions, marriage, and adoption.

Moreover, youth support for equal protections for gays, seems to cross partisan, ideological, and religious lines. For example, majorities of Republican, conservative, and Born-Again Christian youth also support protections on housing, employment, and hate crimes, although they oppose gay civil unions, marriage, and adoption.

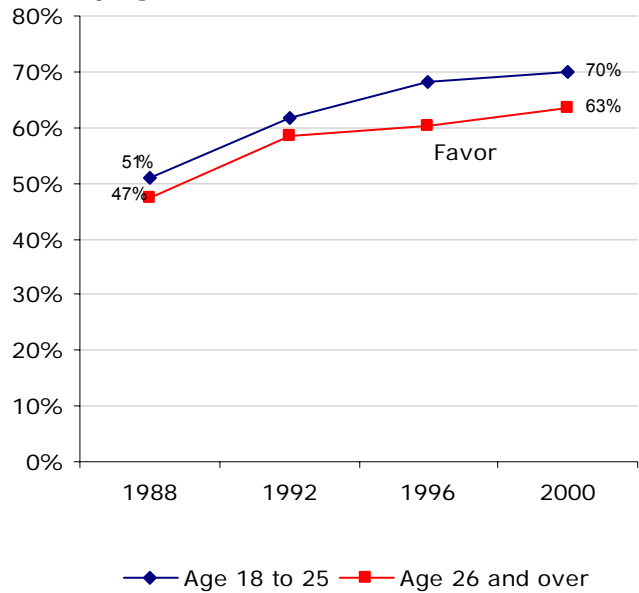
■ Graph 2: Young Americans' Support for Gay and Lesbian Issues



Source: National Youth Survey, 2004 CEG/CIRCLE

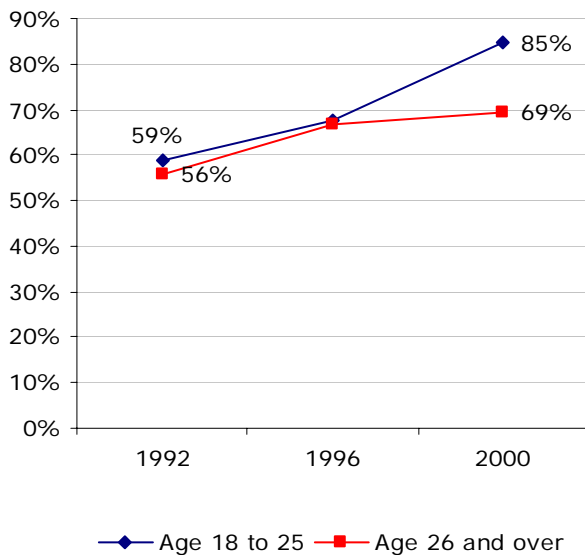
It appears that through the years, young people have become increasingly supportive of laws prohibiting discrimination. The NES began asking about attitudes towards laws prohibiting discrimination against homosexuals in 1988. At that time, 51 percent of youth (ages 18 to 25) felt there should be laws to protect gays from discrimination in the workforce. Only 12 years later, this figure had risen to 70 percent. While less dramatic, attitudes among those over 25 show a similar pattern (see Graph 3).

Graph 3: "Do you favor or oppose laws to protect homosexuals against job discrimination," by Age



Source: National Election Study, 1988-2000

Graph 4: Homosexuals should be allowed to serve in the US Armed Forces, by Age



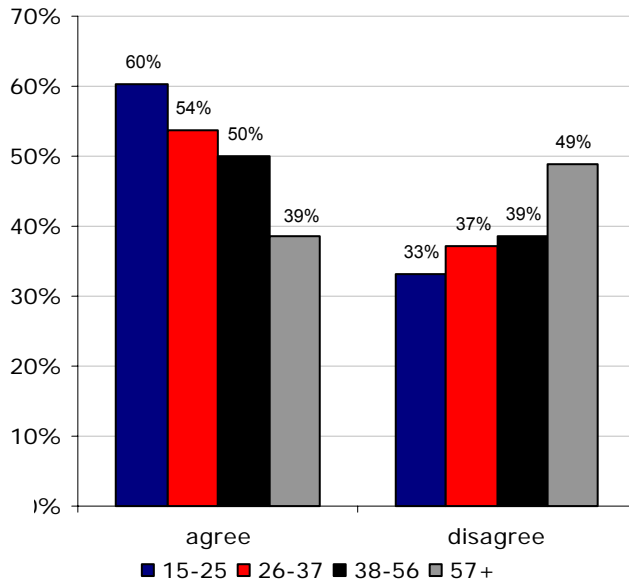
Source: National Election Study, 1992-2000

Another question, whether gays should be allowed in the military, shows a similar trend over a short period of time. See Graph 4.

The Civic and Political Health of the Nation provides a more general view of attitudes toward homosexuals. It asked respondents to agree or disagree with the statement, "homosexuality is a way of life that should be accepted by society." A majority of all age groups except those over 57 agreed with this idea. Youth were the most tolerant group, with 60 percent believing society should accept homosexuality. Graph 5 provides more data on this question.

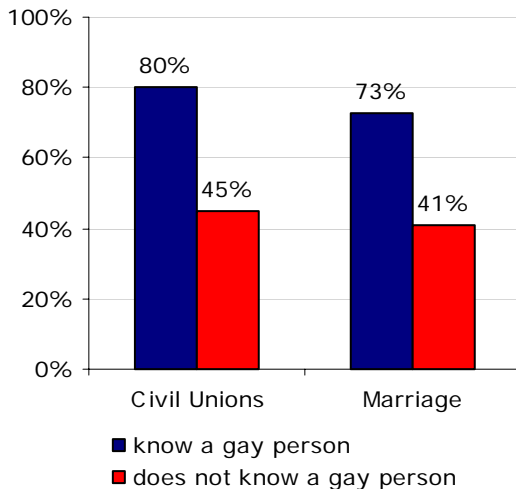
When youth know someone who is gay, they are more likely to support rights for all homosexuals. Graph 6 shows this divergence in attitudes on two dimensions, civil unions and marriage. Support for these rights is nearly two times more prominent among those who know at least one gay person. This survey found that 49 percent of youth knew a gay person while 47 percent did not. At least for this dimension of tolerance, it seems like exposure to difference encourages tolerance.

Graph 5: "Homosexuality is a way of life that should be accepted by society," by Age



Source: CIRCLE/The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait, Sep 2002

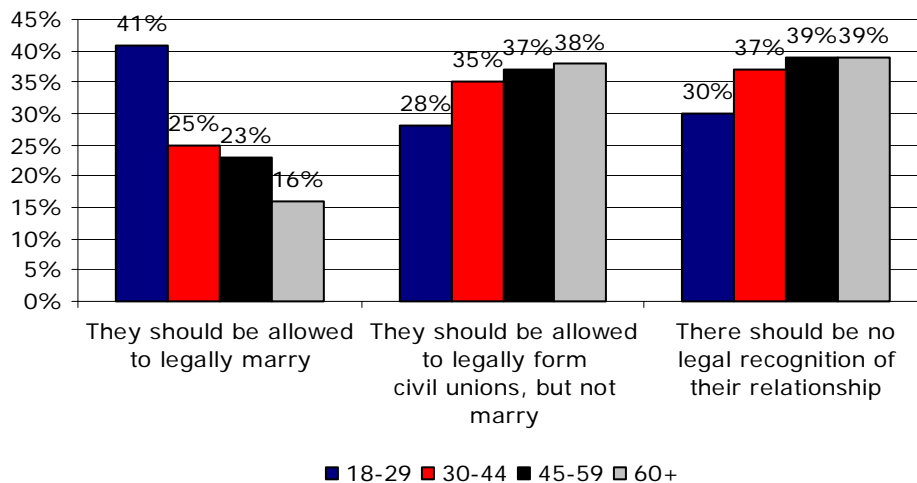
Graph 6: Youth Attitudes Toward Civil Unions and Gay Marriage



Source: National Youth Survey, 2004 CEG/CIRCLE

Generally, surveys have shown that young people are more accepting of diversity than older people. These differences in attitudes seem to carry into the political arena. For example, the 2004 National Election Pool (NEP) exit poll showed that young voters (age 18-29) were 16 percentage points more likely than 30-44 year olds to say gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to legally marry and 25 percentage points more likely than those ages 60 and above (see Graph 7).

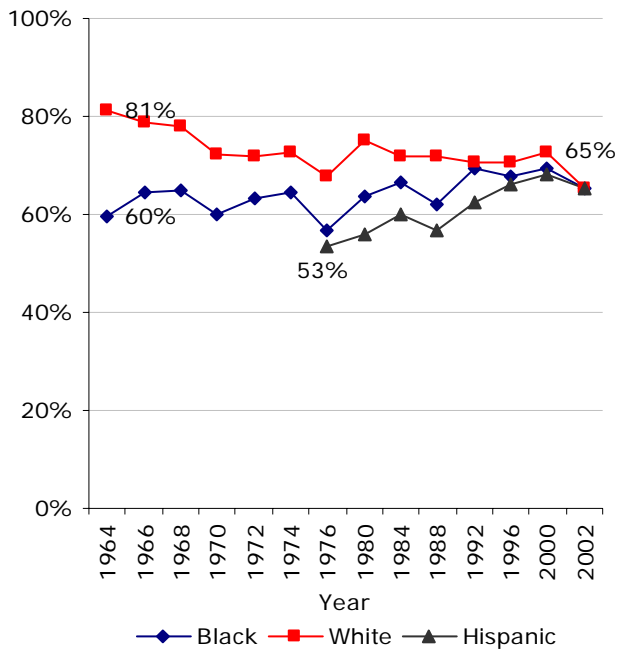
Graph 7: Which comes closest to your views of gay and lesbian couples



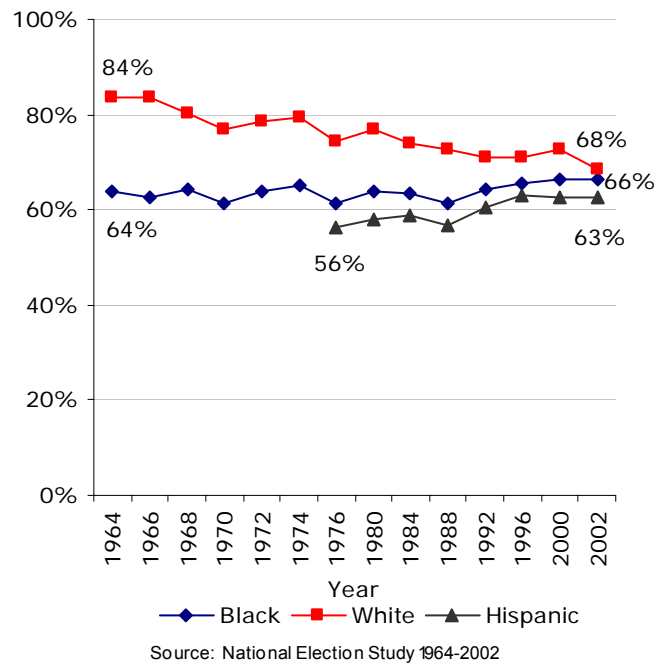
Racial and Ethnic Discrimination

Looking at more concrete questions, like attitudes toward racial and ethnic minorities, could help clarify the attitudes of Americans to diversity. The National Election Study (NES) uses “feeling thermometers”³ to assess general attitudes toward specific people as well as societal groups. Historical data on attitudes towards whites and African Americans since 1964 and towards Latinos since 1976 is available from the NES. As Graphs 8 and 9 show, there has been a convergence in feelings about racial/ethnic groups. This convergence has been more dramatic among youth, who show almost identical attitudes towards Hispanics, Blacks, and Whites. Elder Americans have a 3 percentage point difference in attitudes toward Hispanics and Whites. The growing diversity of the population over the years may explain some of the attitudinal changes. Young White Americans' attitudes toward African Americans and Latinos have been basically stable, but the percentage of young people who are White has fallen.

Graph 8: Feeling Thermometers, 18-25

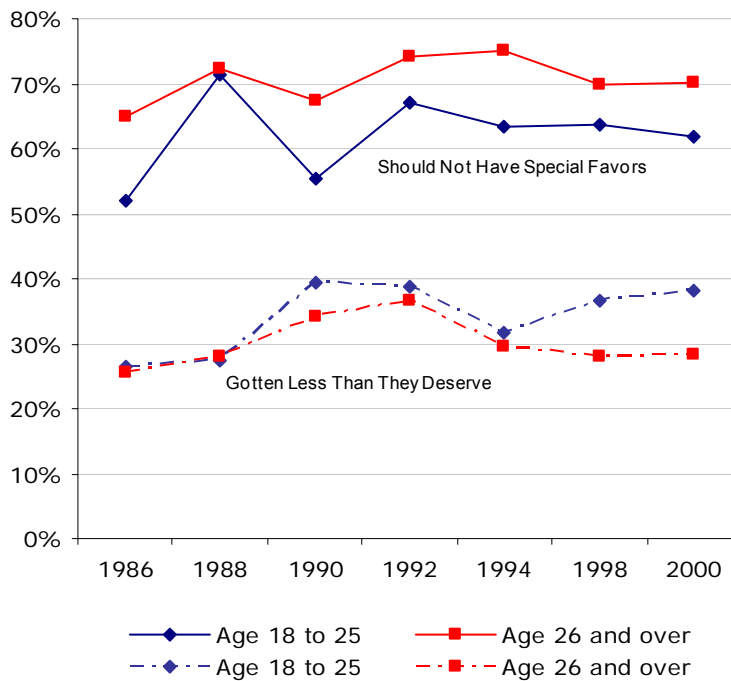


Graph 9: Feeling Thermometers, 26 and over



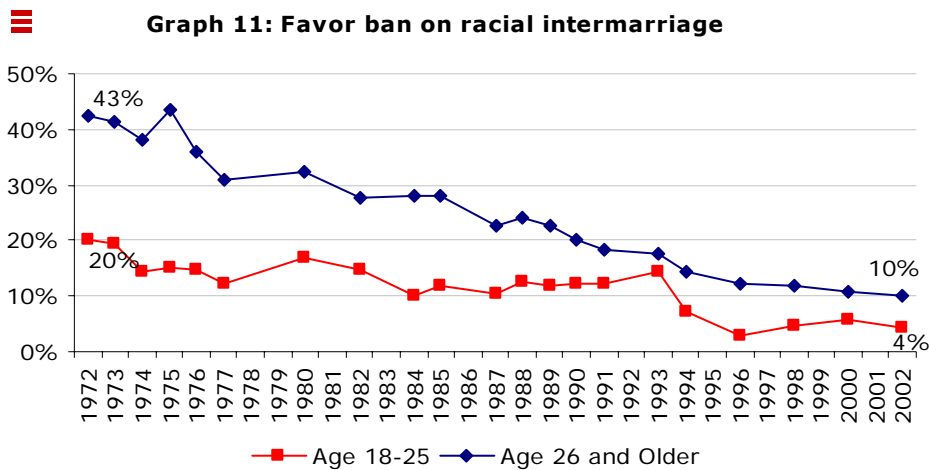
While a general picture of attitudes toward racial and ethnic minorities is important, several surveys have looked into attitudes regarding governmental policies like affirmative action. The NES, starting in 1986, asked respondents if they agreed or disagreed with two statements regarding the treatment of African Americans. The first statement was “over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve.” The second compared Blacks to other minority groups and stated, “Irish, Italians, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.” Graph 10 indicates the responses of youth and adults over the past two decades. Youth are more likely than their elders to view the position of Blacks sympathetically. However, compared to 1996, in 2000, both youth and adults were more likely to believe that Blacks should not have special favors.

Graph 10: Attitudes toward Blacks, by Age



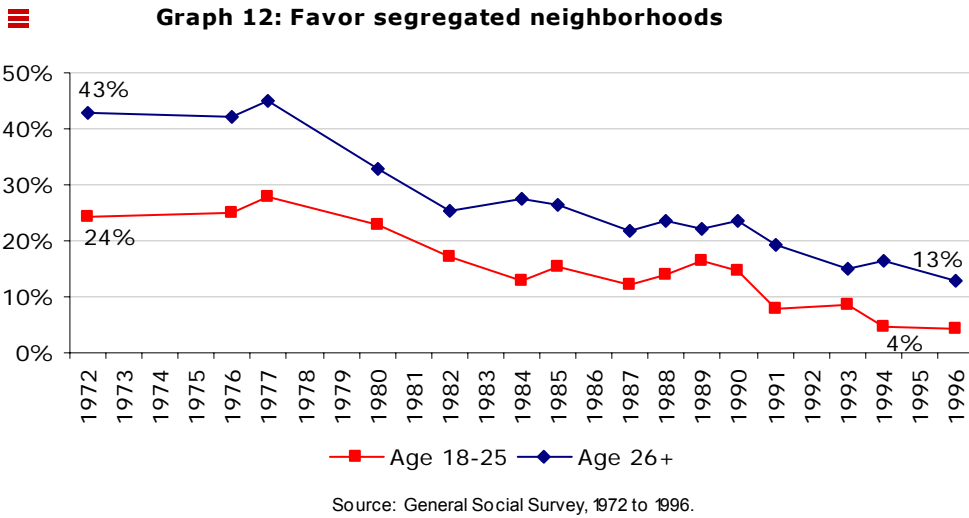
Source: National Election Survey

Another instrument, the General Social Survey (GSS) asked respondents questions about race over a number of years. When the GSS first asked in 1972 if respondents would favor a legal ban on interracial marriage, 20 percent of younger Americans and 43 percent of those 26 and older said they would. A generation later, in 2000, these percentages had fallen dramatically – four percent of youth and 10 percent of older Americans still favored such a ban (see Graph 11).

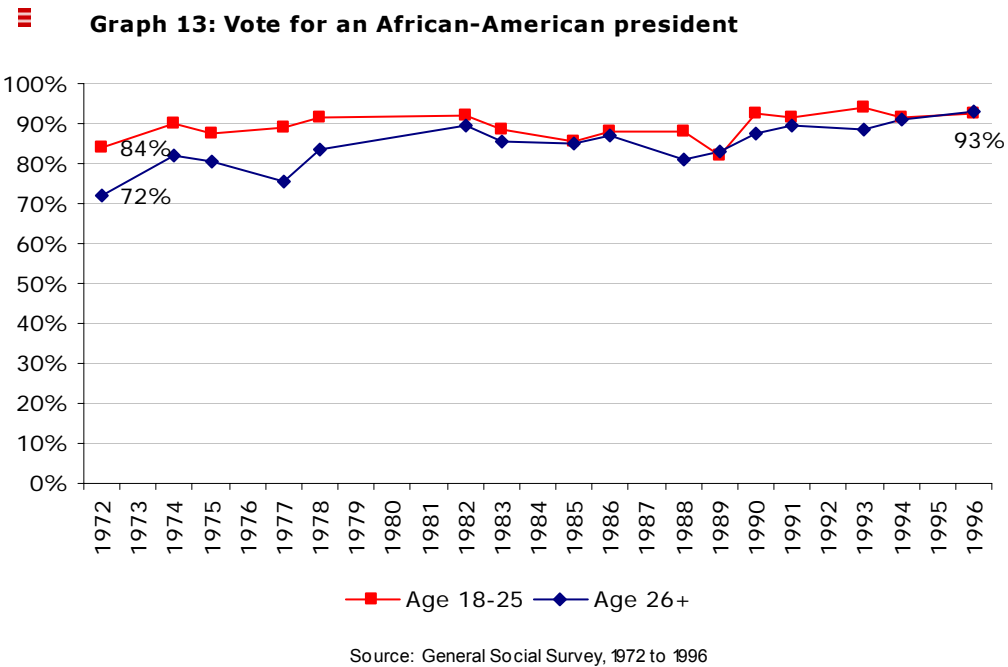


Source: General Social Survey, 1972 to 2002.

The number of Americans who favored the segregation of neighborhoods fell in a similarly dramatic fashion. In 1972, 24 percent of Americans aged 18 to 25 and 43 percent of Americans 26 and older agreed that “whites have the right to keep blacks out of their neighborhoods and that blacks should respect that right.” By 1996, the percentage who agreed with this statement had fallen to four percent for youth and 13 percent for older Americans. Graph 12 illustrates this trend.



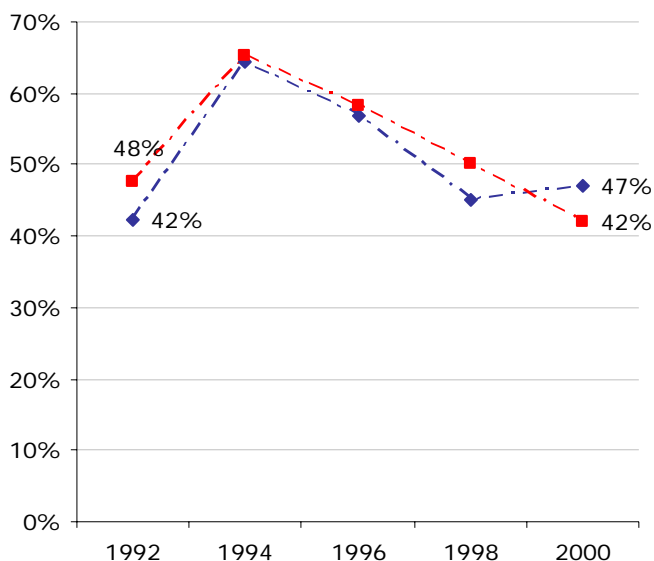
When asked in 1972 whether they would vote for a black person to be President, 84 percent of youth and 72 percent of those 26 and older said they would. By 1996, 93 percent of youth and adults said they would vote for an African American president (see Graph 13).



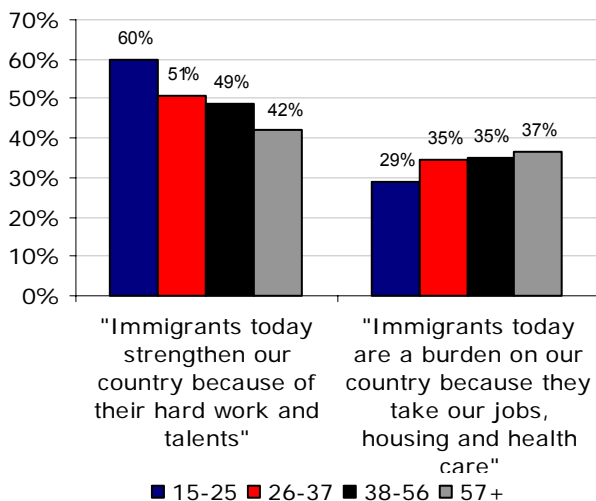
Opinions of Immigration and Immigrants

While generally it appears that discrimination towards homosexuals and racial and ethnic minorities is on the decline, attitudes towards immigration follow a different pattern. As Graph 14 (based on NES data) shows, a plurality of Americans at any age group in any year think immigration should be decreased. Approximately 10 percent believe the U.S. should increase the number of immigrants allowed in the country. Both these numbers are highly sensitive to current politics, however, as can be seen by the spike in 1994 of those who said immigration should be decreased. This was around the time NAFTA was being debated in Washington.

Graph 14: Decrease immigration, by Age



Graph 15: Attitudes towards immigrants, by Age



◆ Age 18 to 25 ■ Age 26 and over

Source: National Election Survey, 1992-2000

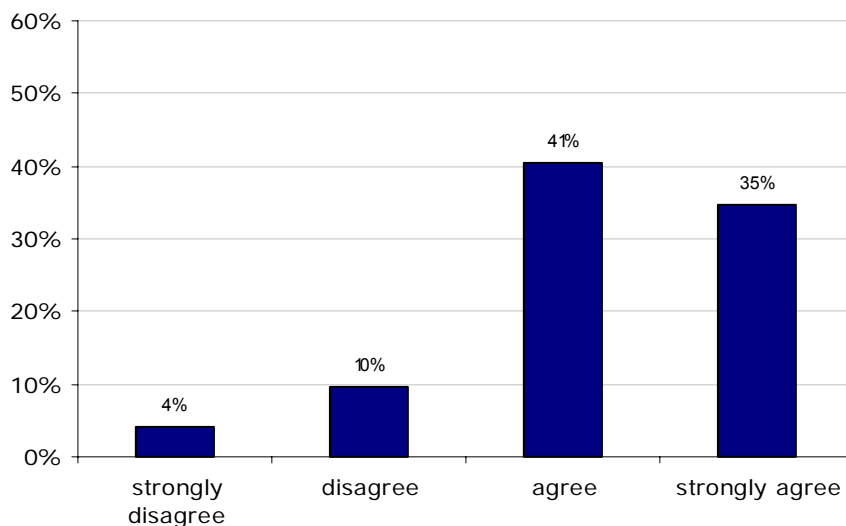
In 2002, *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation* survey asked respondents whether "immigrants today strengthen our country because of their hard work and talents" or "immigrants today are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing and health care" (see Graph 15). More people in all age groups chose the former statement. This survey was taken one year after the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington, DC.

Source: CIRCLE/The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait, Sep 2002

The IEA Civic Education survey provides some information on how the nation's youth feel about issues of immigration. In many ways, their attitudes reflect those shown in surveys of adults. There is a respect for diversity but skepticism about its impact on society. Graph 16 illustrates the attitudes of 9th graders with respect to immigrants' rights. Only 14 percent believe that immigrants should be denied the same rights as the native population.

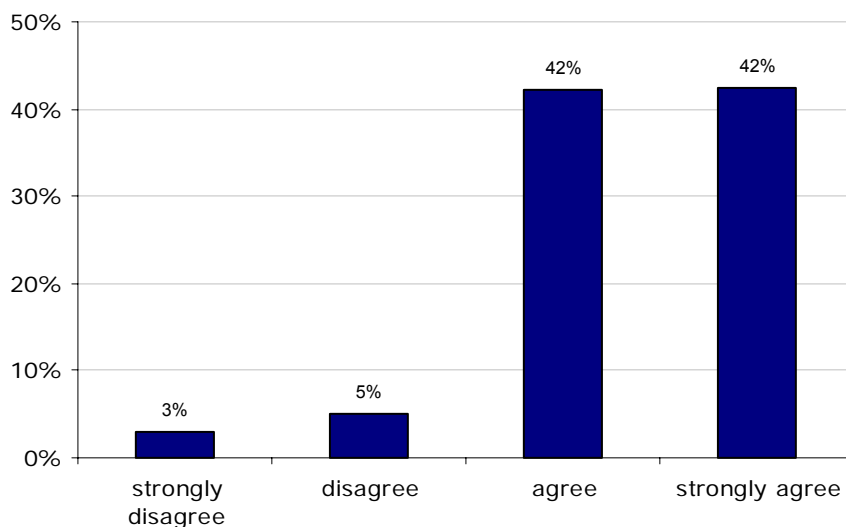
The IEA Civic Education Study also asked students about the assimilation of immigrants into American culture. Here, again, youth expressed extremely accepting views. Three-quarters of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "immigrants should have the opportunity to keep their own customs and lifestyle" (see Graph 17). At the same time, however, youth understand that along with diversity come challenges. When asked whether large numbers of immigrants make it difficult for a country to be "united and patriotic," 30 percent agreed (see Graph 18, next page). A substantial percentage of students see a danger for the country in terms of lower levels of unity and patriotism, yet still believe that it is appropriate for immigrants to be able to maintain their own separate culture.

Graph 16: "Immigrants should have all the same rights that everyone else in a country has"



Source: IEA Civic Education Study, Aug 2002

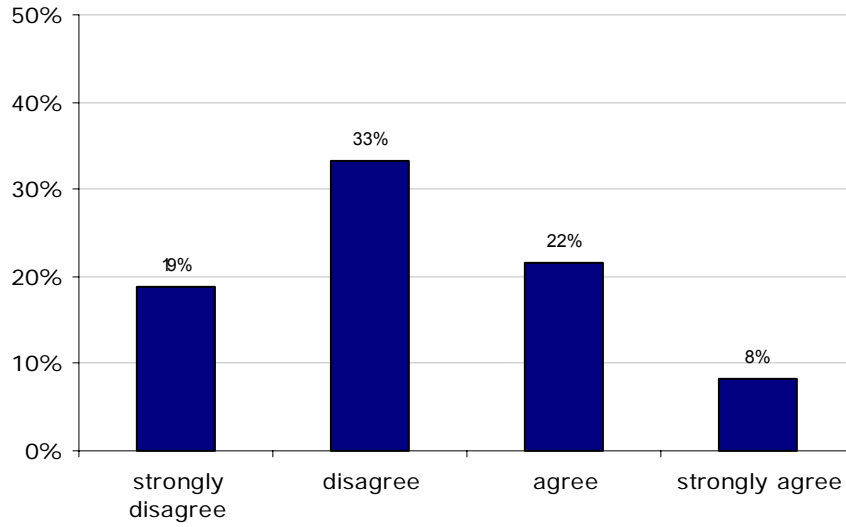
Graph 17: "Immigrants' children should have the same opportunities for education that other children in the country have"



Source: IEA Civic Education Study, Aug 2002



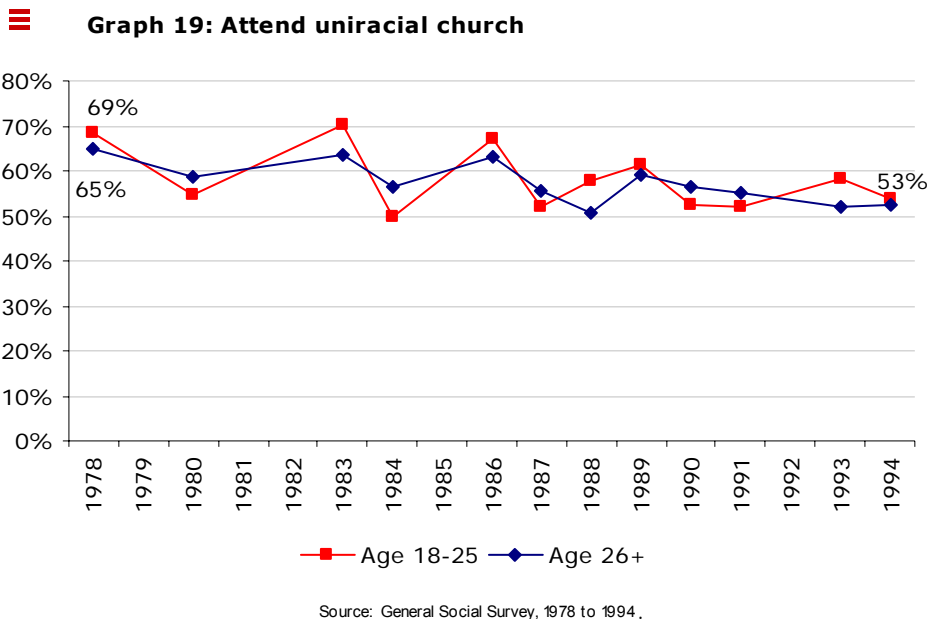
Graph 18: "Having many immigrants makes it difficult for a country to be united and patriotic"



Source: IEA Civic Education Study, Aug 2002

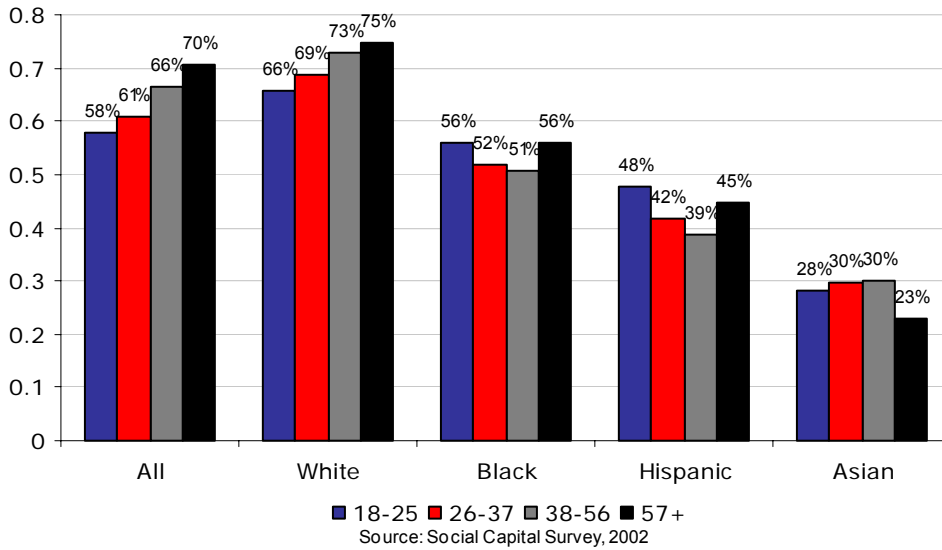
Encountering Different People

While the data presented so far indicate that Americans of all ages have developed more accepting attitudes towards diversity over the years, there are some limitations in practice. For instance, the number of American youth who say they attend church only with people of the same race dropped from 69 percent (and 65 percent of older Americans) in 1978 to 53 percent in 1994. While this does represent a slight rise in diversity (if not tolerance), it still means that over half of churchgoers, typically among the most civically engaged Americans, attend uni-racial churches (see Graph 19).



The Social Capital Survey (SCS) asked respondents whether they were members of participatory groups (like the PTA or a church group). If so, they were asked to identify how many of the other members were of the same race as the respondent. Graph 20 shows what percent of respondents answered “all” or “most.” Whites are the least likely to share membership with people of other races. While White youth are more exposed to racial difference, Black and Hispanic youth are more isolated than their elders.

Graph 20: All or most members of participatory group that are of the same race, by race and age

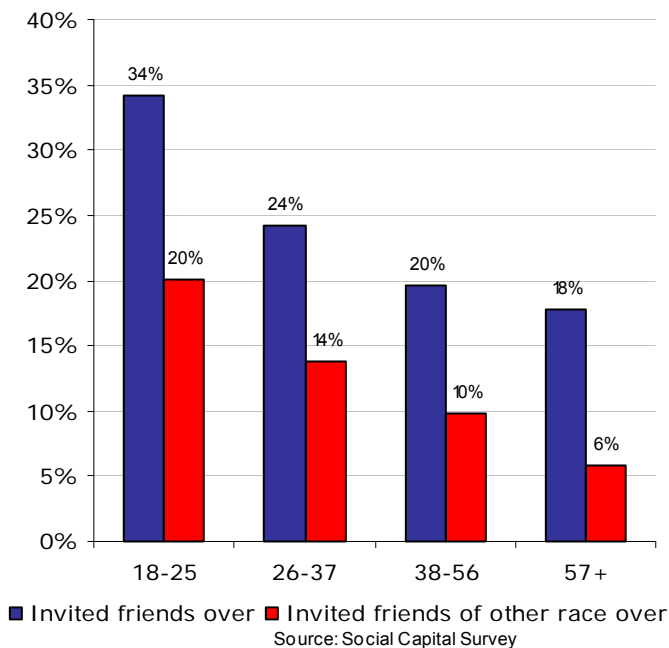


Another question asked how often friends came over to socialize and then asked how often friends of a different race came to the respondent's house. As Graph 21 shows, youth are the most social group and are also more likely than their elders to invite friends of a different race over to their homes.

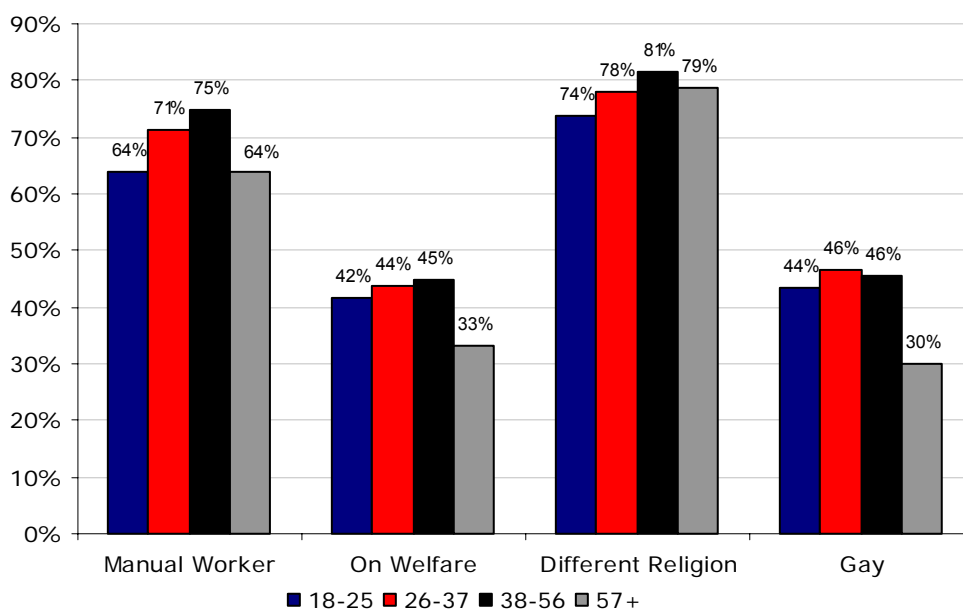
The SCS also asked some questions about social and economic differences. For example, it asked a series of questions about "personal friends." These included whether the respondent had a personal friend who was gay or had been on welfare. While youth are more social in general than other age groups and more likely to have friends of a different race, they are slightly less likely to have friends of a different religion or economic background (see Graph 22).

Unlike the GSS, the SCS cannot speak to changes over time. It may be that youth were even less likely to meet people of other social and economic backgrounds in earlier decades. However, these results, in combination with the GSS findings about uni-racial church-going, seem to indicate a population that is not becoming more integrated in civil society groups.

Graph 21: Frequency of friend's visits



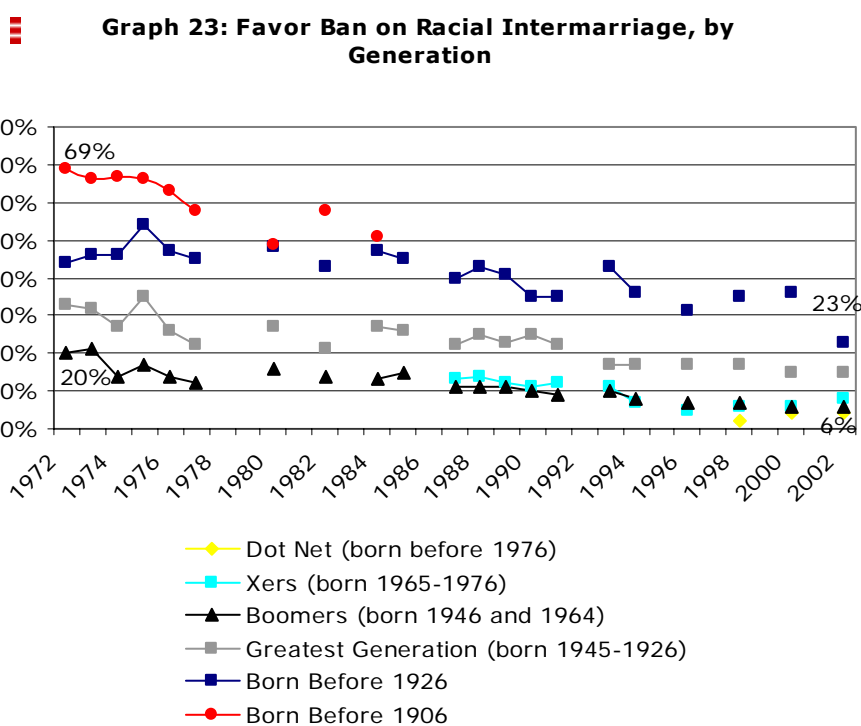
Graph 22: "Do you have a personal friend who is _____?" by Age



Generational Changes in Attitudes

Overall, surveys indicate that people's attitudes towards homosexuals, racial/ethnic minorities, and immigrants are becoming increasingly more accepting. Using the GSS we can try to figure out whether some of these differences in attitudes are a function of age, a larger societal issue, or some historical event. Looking at the issue of inter-racial marriage, the GSS asks: "Do you think there should be laws against marriages between (Negroes/Blacks/African- Americans) and whites?"

Graph 23 shows how the attitudes of age cohorts (or generations) towards a ban on racial intermarriage changed as the groups aged. For example, Baby Boomers, those born between 1956 and 1964, became less likely to favor a ban on racial intermarriage as they aged. Moreover, in nearly all years, the most tolerant people are the youngest.



Source: General Social Survey, 1972 to 2002

This graph suggests that the growing support for racial intermarriage is a function of history since all generations shifted their attitudes towards racial intermarriage. Additionally, there may be a small age effect here as throughout the years, the youngest generations are also the least likely to favor a ban on inter-racial marriage. For more information on generational changes in attitudes, please see the CIRCLE Fact Sheet entitled "Young People and the First Amendment."

NOTES

¹ We thank Chris Herbst, Mark Hugo Lopez, Carrie Donovan, and Peter Levine for helpful comments on previous drafts of this fact sheet. All errors in interpretation are our own.

² The 2004 NEP exit poll found that young people were more likely to support allowing gay and lesbian couples to marry than to form a civil union. This difference in findings between the NEP exit poll and the 2004 National Youth Survey may be caused by a variety of factors. To begin, the two surveys are measuring attitudes of two different populations. The NEP exit poll is a sample of 18-30 year olds voters whereas the 2004 National Youth Survey is a sample of the general 15-25 year old population. Additionally, the questions were worded differently in the two surveys. The NEP exit poll asks, "Which comes closest to your view of gay and lesbian couples: 1)They should be allowed to legally marry 2) They should be allowed to legally form civil unions, but not marry 3) There should be no legal recognition of their relationships". The 2004 National Youth Survey asks whether or not homosexuals should or should not be able to have the right to do a variety of things including "form a civil union of legal partnership" and "get legally married".

³ The National Election Study uses a "feeling thermometers, which are 100-point Likert scales, to measure the respondents' reactions to a variety of different issues.