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Immigrants Assimilate into the Political Mainstream

by Alex Nowrasteh and Sam Wilson

Immigrants could shift public policy if their opinions differ from those of other Americans.¹ Our earlier research found that immigrants and native-born Americans have ideological, political, and public policy opinions that differ to a statistically insignificant extent.² In this report we further separate immigrant political and policy opinions by citizenship status. Noncitizen immigrants *cannot* vote but their political opinions are mostly similar to those of natives. However, naturalized citizen-immigrants who *can* vote have political opinions even closer to those of natives and are near-fully assimilated into the political mainstream.

Measuring the Political Assimilation of Immigrants and Their Descendants

This analysis is based on responses from the nationwide biennial General Social Survey (GSS) conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. The GSS data allows us to directly³ measure the opinions of immigrants and their descendants.⁴ We compared responses to questions of political party identification, ideology, and policy preferences from native-born Americans by generation to immigrants by citizenship for the years 2004–2014.⁵ We checked whether their responses were similar to those of native-born Americans or whether they differed to a statistically significant extent.⁶ The size of the samples varies by the question asked and generation polled. The numbers polled for each question are in Table 2.

Alex Nowrasteh is an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity. Sam Wilson is a PhD student in economics at George Mason University.

Table 1 defines each generation. The second generation and each subsequent generation are all American citizens at birth. We define assimilation as when the differences of opinion between immigrants and native-born Americans are statistically insignificant (henceforth “similar”).

Political Party Identification. Figure 1 shows that all immigrants—citizens and noncitizens alike—are more likely to be independent, about as likely to identify as Democratic, and less likely to identify as Republican. Political party identification is not a measurement of the political parties or candidates that the respondents actually vote for; it is merely their own self-identification. For instance, immigrants who are independent mostly vote for Democratic candidates even though they do not self-identify as Democrats.⁷

Immigrant differences are statistically significant because they are more likely to be independent, not because they are more likely to be Democratic. Those statistically significant differences in Figure 1 become insignificant when only naturalized immigrants are compared to natives although this result could be driven by small sample sizes (see Figure 2). Naturalized immigrants still support Democrats more than Republicans, and their support for Independents falls by over 10 percentage points compared to all immigrants and nonnaturalized immigrants. The responses of naturalized immigrants partially converge with those of natives in Figure 2 and close further in subsequent generations (Figure 3).

Nonnaturalized immigrants and natives have different political party affiliations to a statistically significant extent

Table 1
Respondent Categories

	Born in U.S.	Both Parents Born in U.S.	All Four Grandparents Born in U.S.
First Generation/Immigrant	No	No	No
Second Generation	Yes	No	No
Third Generation	Yes	Yes	No
Fourth Generation or Greater	Yes	Yes	Yes
Native-Born American	Yes	N/A	N/A

(see Figure 4). The political party affiliations of naturalized immigrants are more similar to those of other Americans by generation, while noncitizen immigrants have very different opinions (see Figure 4). Over time, each generation is slightly more Republican and slightly less Democratic than the previous generation. Noncitizen immigrants are significantly more Independent than first-, second-, third-, and fourth-generation Americans.

Political Ideology. Immigrants and natives share statistically similar political ideologies, though immigrants are slightly more liberal and moderate while natives are more conservative (Figure 5).

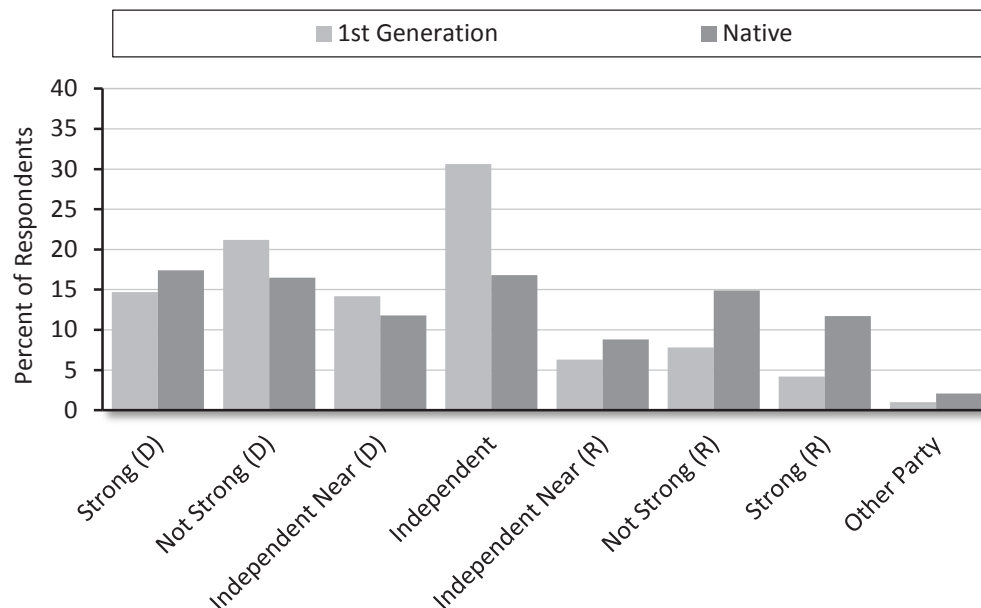
Naturalized immigrants are similar to native-born Americans (Figure 6). They are less liberal and less moderate but more conservative than all immigrants. Noncitizen immigrants are more liberal, more moderate, and less conservative than both natives and naturalized

immigrants (Figure 7). Figure 8 shows that noncitizen immigrants have opinions that are a bit different from those of native-born Americans and naturalized immigrants. Those slight differences in opinion nearly disappear among naturalized immigrants and fade further with each new generation. Immigrants and their descendants are not a statist fifth column.

Public Policies. This section analyzes responses to specific policy questions. The first question is whether the government should do more or less. All immigrants are more likely to say the government should do more than all natives are (see Figure 9).

That finding is less important than it seems for two reasons. First, broad survey questions like this are poor at measuring actual policy preferences whereas questions about specific policies produce a more accurate picture of immigrant policy preference. Second, the opinions become

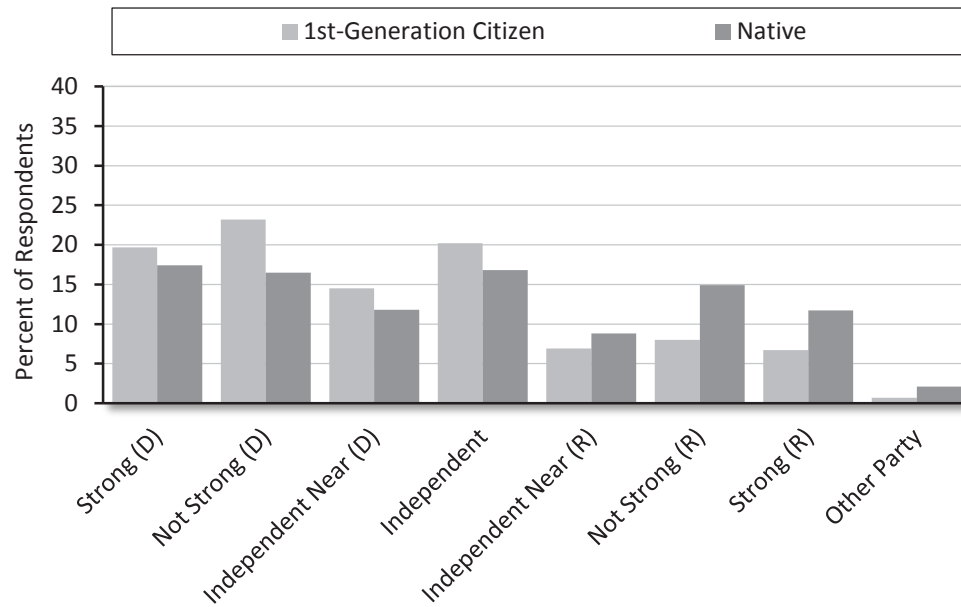
Figure 1
Political Party Affiliation of All Immigrants and Natives



Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Note: D means Democratic Party and R means Republican Party.

Figure 2
Political Party Affiliation of Naturalized Immigrants and Natives



Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Table 2
Number of Responses per Question and Generation

Question	1st Generation	1st-Generation Citizen	1st-Generation Noncitizen	2nd Generation	3rd Generation	4th+ Generation
Political Party Affiliation	1,560	129	118	558	530	7,900
Ideology	1,344	74	66	491	459	6,866
Government Do More or Less	927	284	332	328	292	4,583
Government Spending on Welfare	714	97	94	275	264	3,864
Social Security Benefit Levels	1,431	433	448	538	521	7,667
Government Spending to Improve/Protect Environment	727	206	242	281	263	3,891
Government Should Reduce Income Differences	966	296	350	341	299	4,676
Marijuana Should be Legalized	902	279	327	322	280	4,372
Government Assistance to Poor	962	292	347	335	295	4,622
Number of Immigrants	990	276	314	359	368	5,271

Source: The General Social Survey, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

similar when only citizen-immigrants are compared to natives (see Figure 10). noncitizen immigrants are more likely than naturalized immigrants and natives to say that the government should do more. Naturalized immigrants and every subsequent generation answer this question similarly while nonnaturalized immigrant opinions differ to a statistically significant extent (see Figure 11).

Responses to many of the following policy questions show that all immigrants have policy opinions that are similar to all natives and every subsequent generation of Americans. Their responses converge when only naturalized immigrants are compared to natives but in some of the questions that effect could be driven by small sample sizes so some caution is warranted. Naturalized immigrants, all native-born Americans, and each generation of Americans have similar opinions on government spending for welfare programs (see Figures 12 and 13), Social Security benefit levels (see Figures 14 and 15), government spending on the environment (see Figures 16 and 17), and government reducing income differences (see Figures 18 and 19). For figures 12 through 17, noncitizen immigrant opinions do not differ to a statistically significant extent but the gaps are wide and many are just barely insignificant. noncitizens are more likely to oppose marijuana legalization but naturalized immigrants support legalization as much as all natives do (see Figures 20 and 21). All immigrants are more likely to support increased government assistance to the poor but the opinion of immigrant citizens is similar to those of natives (see Figures 22 and 23).

Opinions about immigration policy differ the most between immigrants and natives. Immigrant citizens and noncitizens are much more supportive of increasing the number of immigrants relative to all natives (Figure 24). Subsequent generations are progressively more opposed

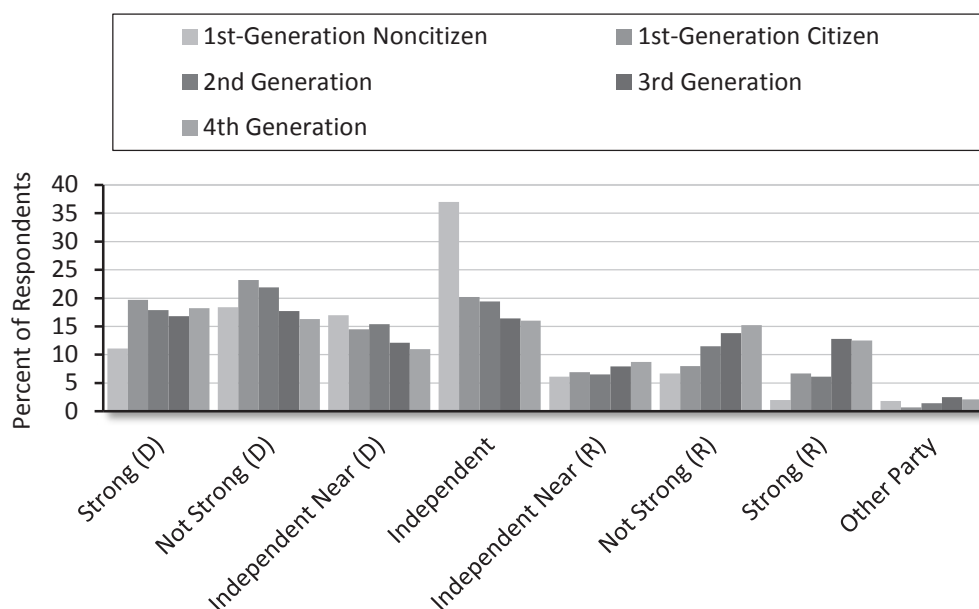
to immigration (Figure 25). The large difference between immigrants and natives in this policy area, larger than any other, could explain the discontinuity between immigrant political party affiliations and their actual votes for the relatively pro-immigration Democratic Party.⁸ If the Republican Party was more supportive of expanding legal immigration, it might be able to attract many of the Republican-identifying immigrants who frequently vote for the Democratic Party.

Conclusion

Immigrants and natives differ more on their opinions about immigration policy than any other issue area, which might explain why so many immigrants who self-identify as Republicans or Independents end up voting for Democratic candidates. On the other issues examined here, naturalized immigrants and natives have mostly similar political, ideological, and policy opinions, although some of these results could be driven by relatively small sample sizes (see Table 2). Nonnaturalized immigrants differ greatly from natives on some of the issues examined here. There are several possible reasons why naturalized immigrants are better politically assimilated. The first is that the curriculum of American history and civics during the naturalization process actually changes their opinions. Another possible explanation is that immigrants who choose to naturalize already share American opinions while immigrants who disagree tend not to naturalize. A third explanation is that immigrants who naturalize have lived in the United States longer than other immigrants, thus giving them more time to politically assimilate. Regardless of the reasons, naturalized immigrants and subsequent generations are politically and ideologically well assimilated.

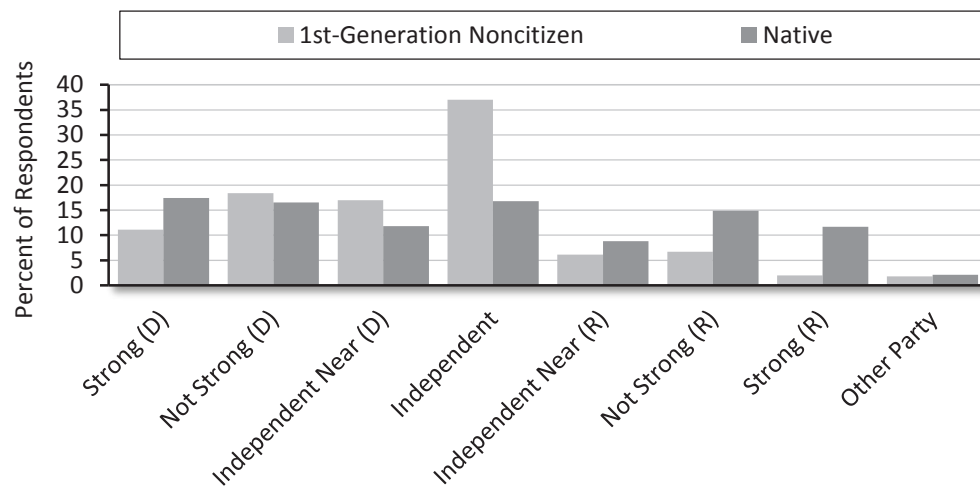
Figure 3

Political Party Affiliation of Immigrants by Naturalization and Each Generation of Americans



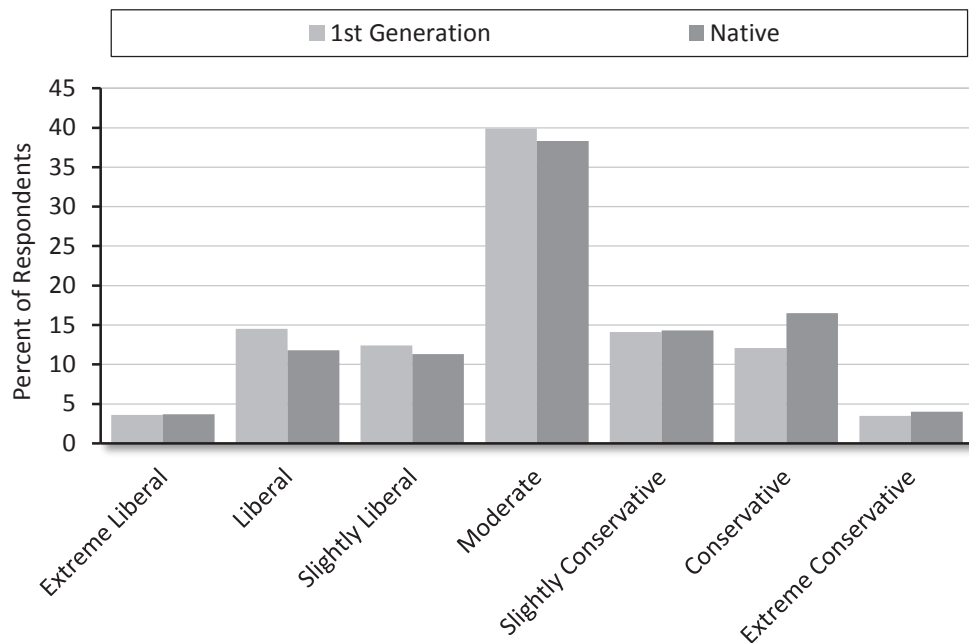
Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Figure 4
Political Party Affiliation of Noncitizen Immigrants and Natives



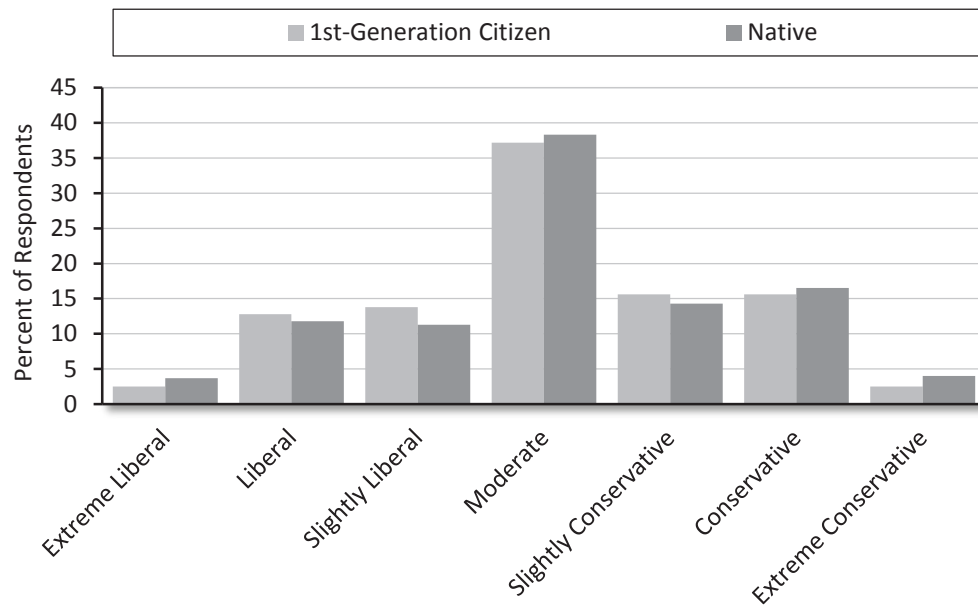
Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Figure 5
Ideology of All Immigrants and Natives



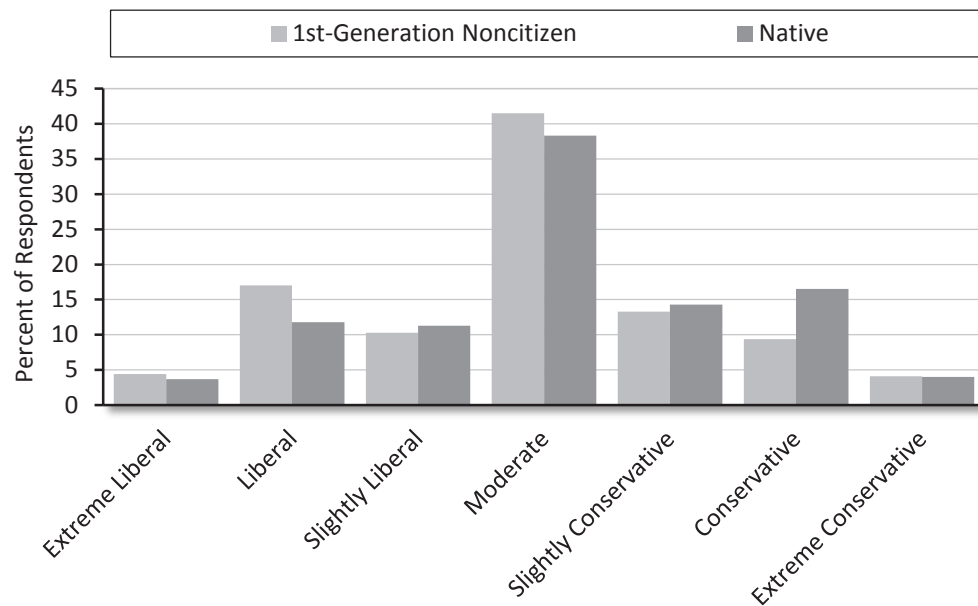
Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Figure 6
Ideology of Naturalized Immigrants and Natives



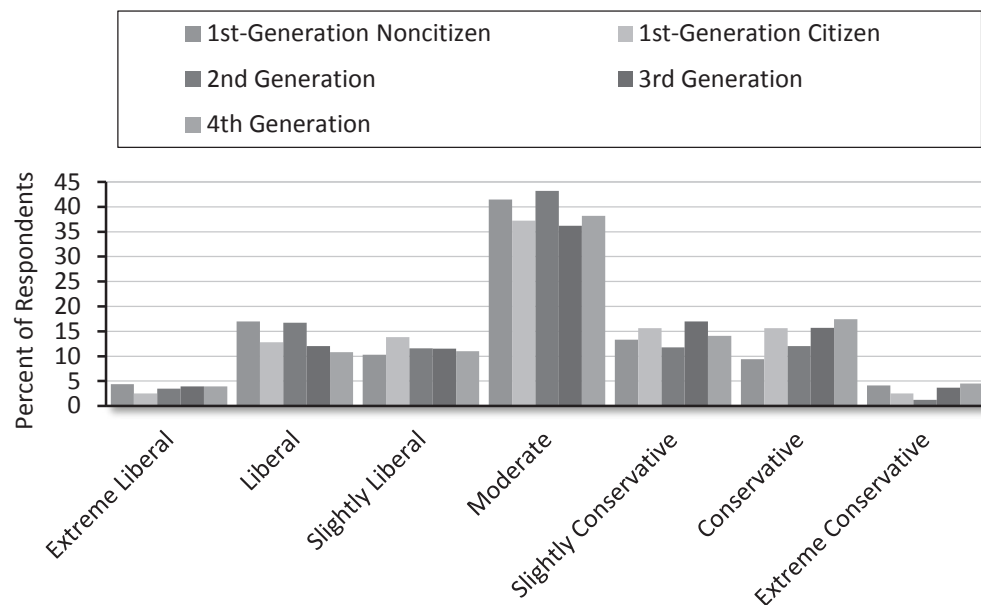
Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Figure 7
Ideology of Noncitizen Immigrants and Natives



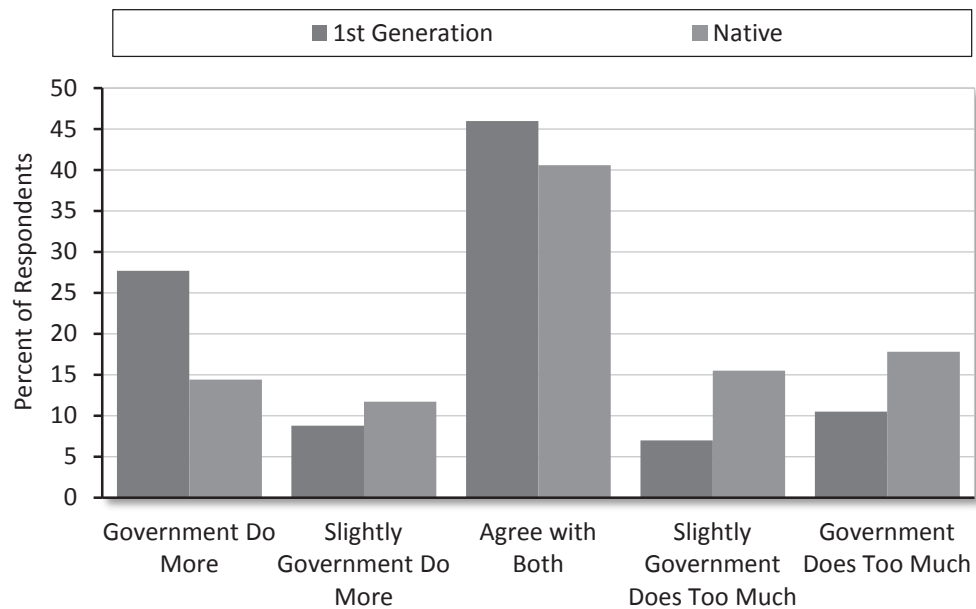
Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Figure 8
Ideology of Immigrants by Naturalization and Each Generation of Americans



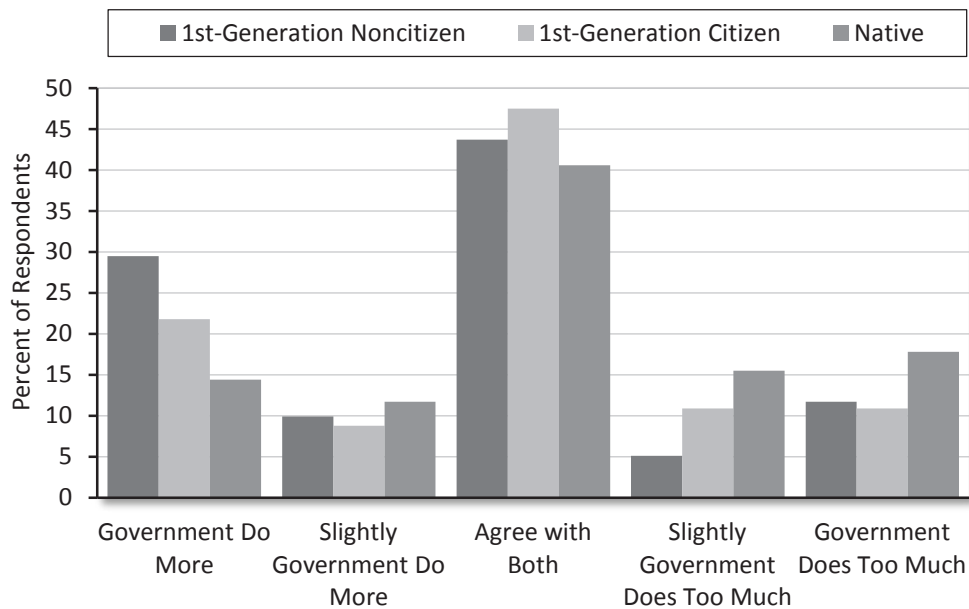
Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Figure 9
Should Government Do More or Less? All Immigrants and All Natives



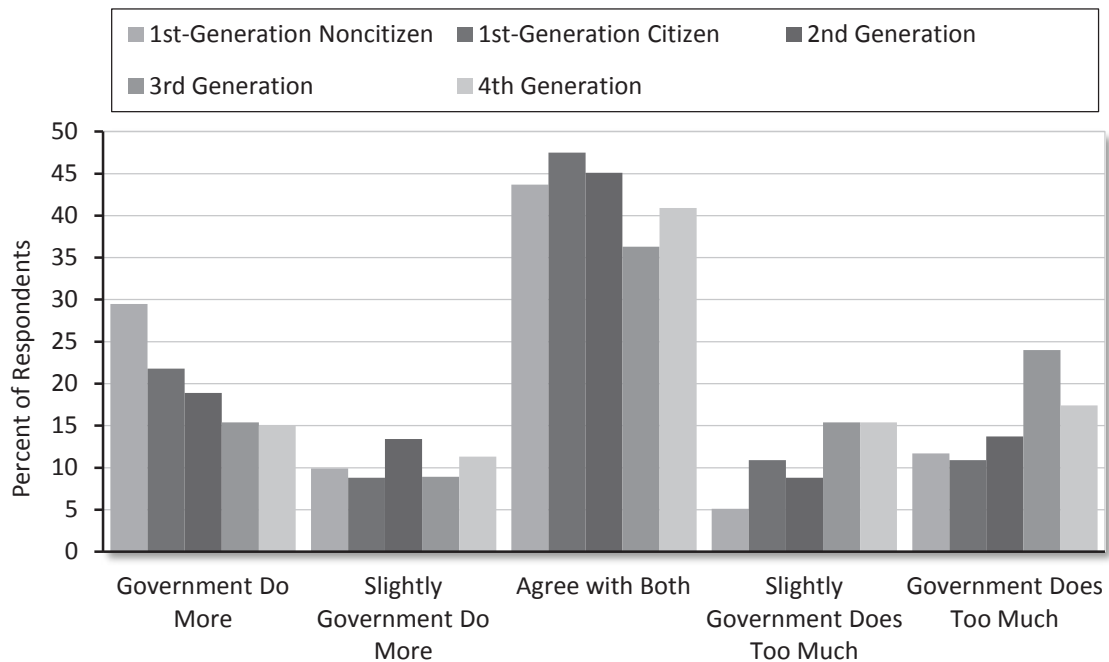
Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Figure 10
Should Government Do More or Less? Immigrants by Naturalization and All Natives



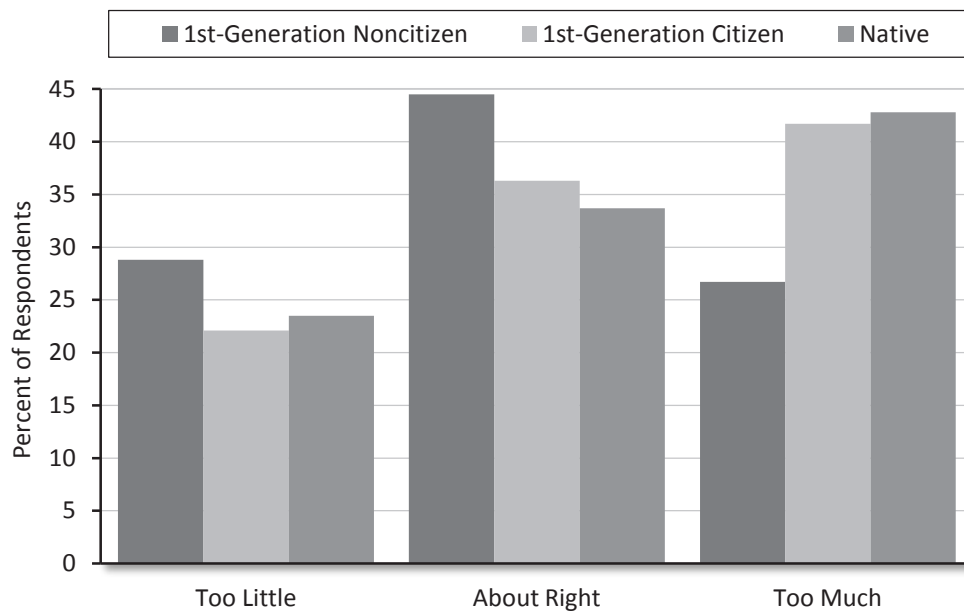
Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Figure 11
Should Government Do More or Less? Immigrants by Naturalization and Each Generation of Americans



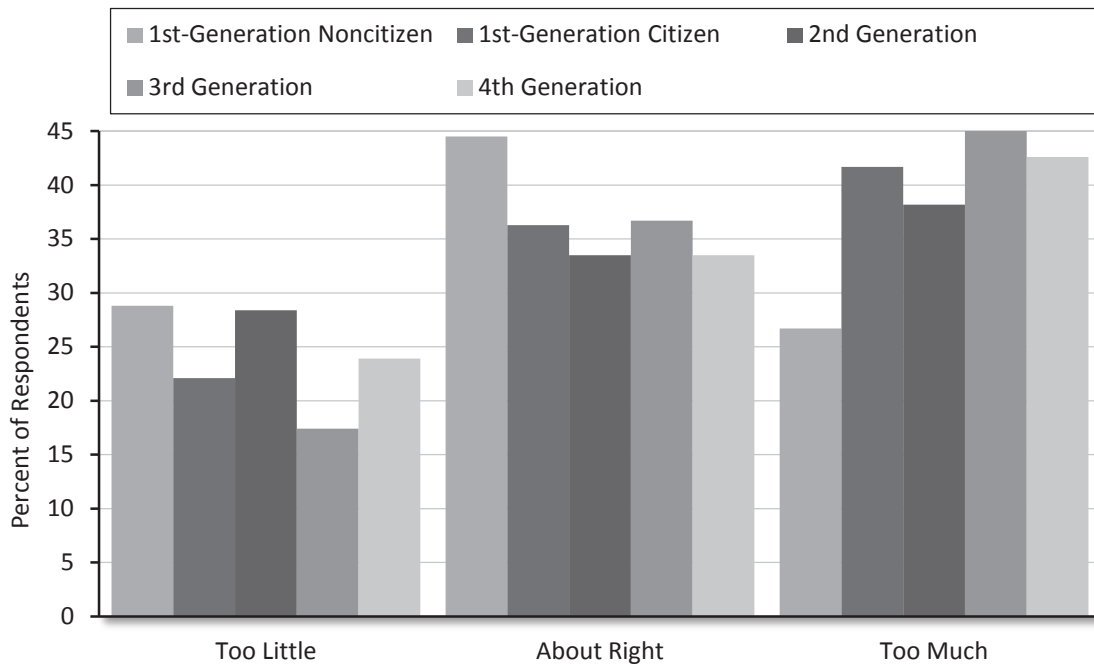
Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Figure 12
Government Spending on Welfare Programs—Immigrants by Naturalization and All Natives



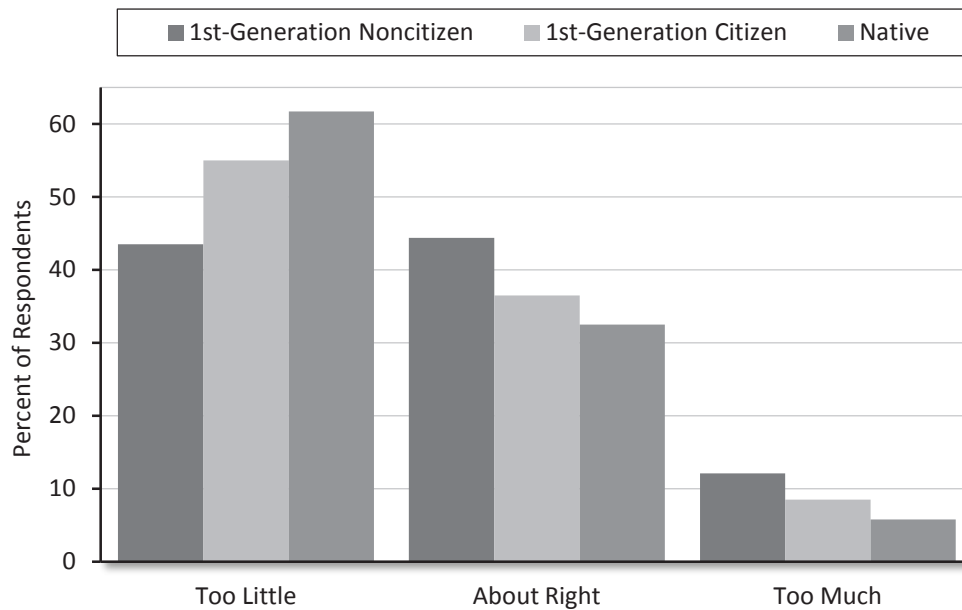
Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Figure 13
Government Spending on Welfare Programs—Immigrants by Naturalization and Each Generation of Americans



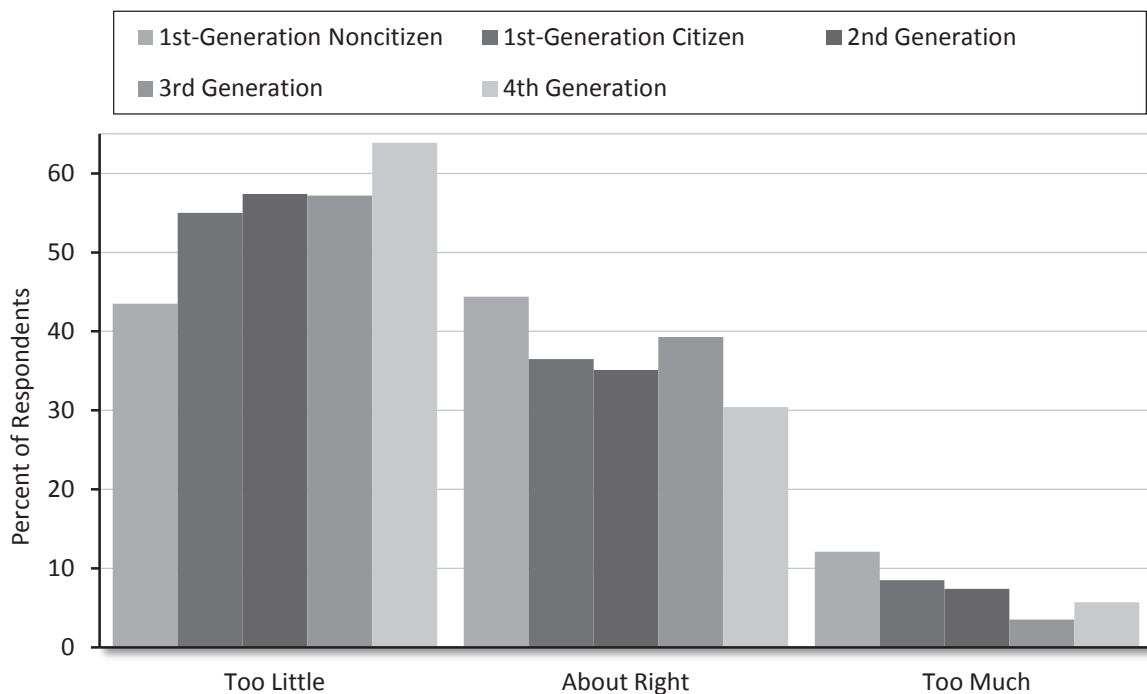
Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Figure 14
Social Security Benefit Levels—Immigrants by Naturalization and All Natives



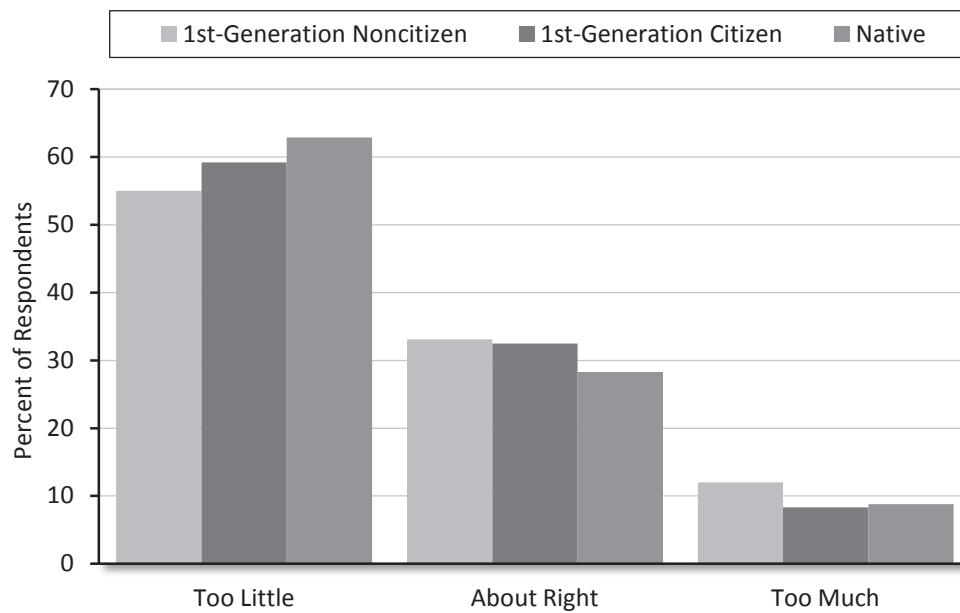
Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Figure 15
Social Security Benefit Levels—Immigrants by Naturalization and Each Generation of Americans



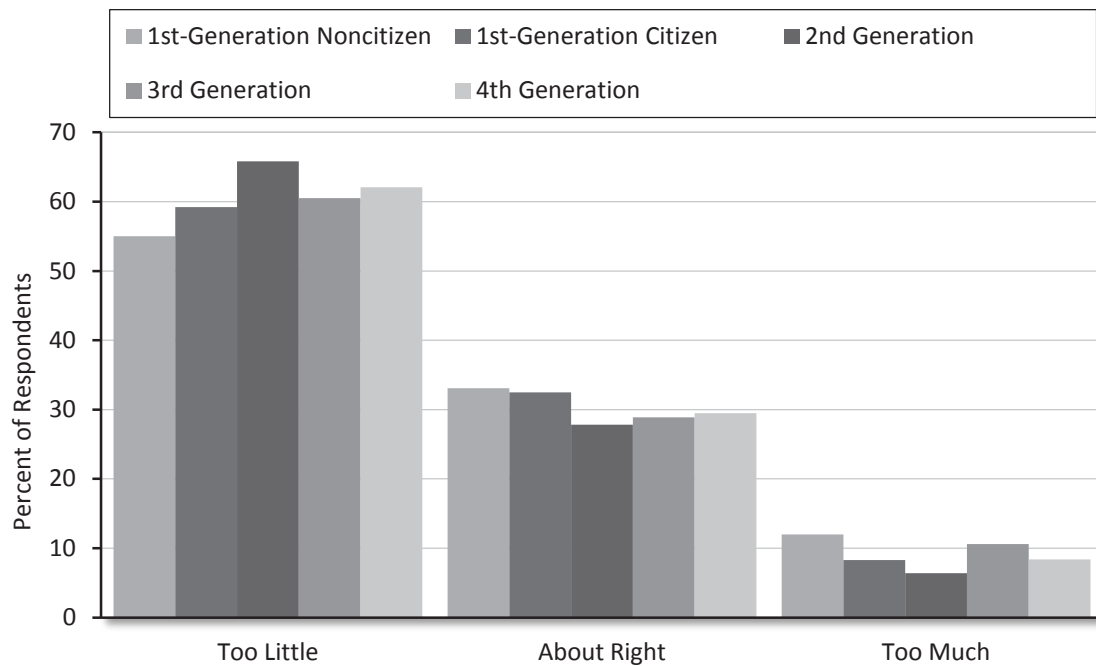
Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Figure 16
Spending to Improve and Protect the Environment—Immigrants by Naturalization and All Natives



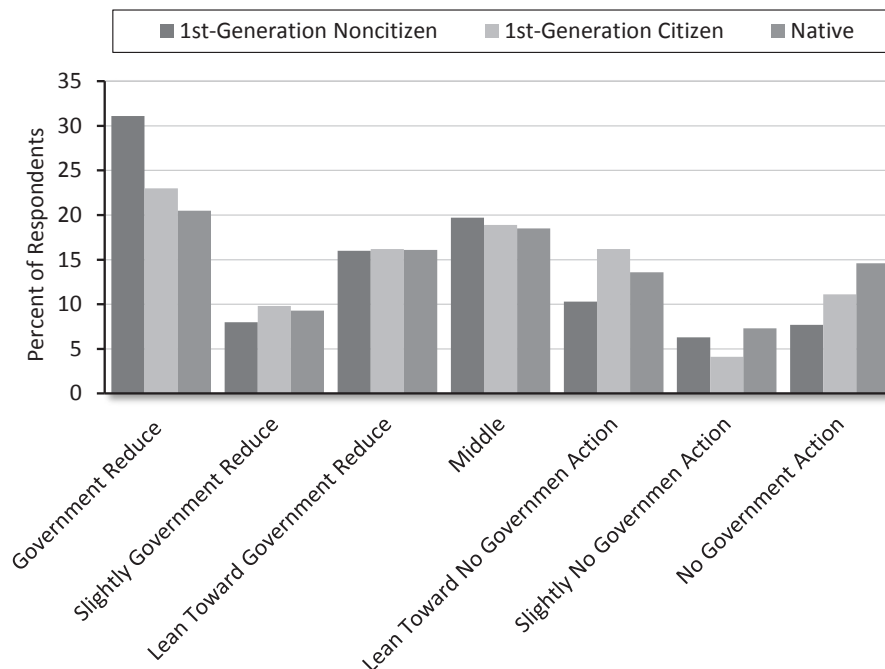
Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Figure 17
Spending to Improve and Protect the Environment—Immigrants by Naturalization and Each Generation of Americans



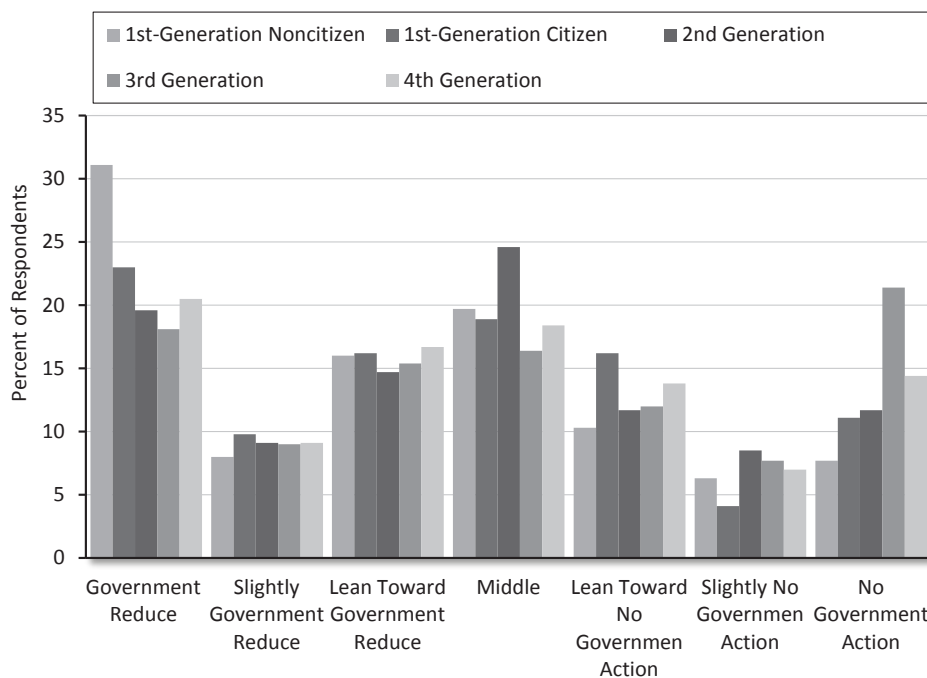
Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Figure 18
Government Should Reduce Income Differences—Immigrants by Naturalization and All Natives



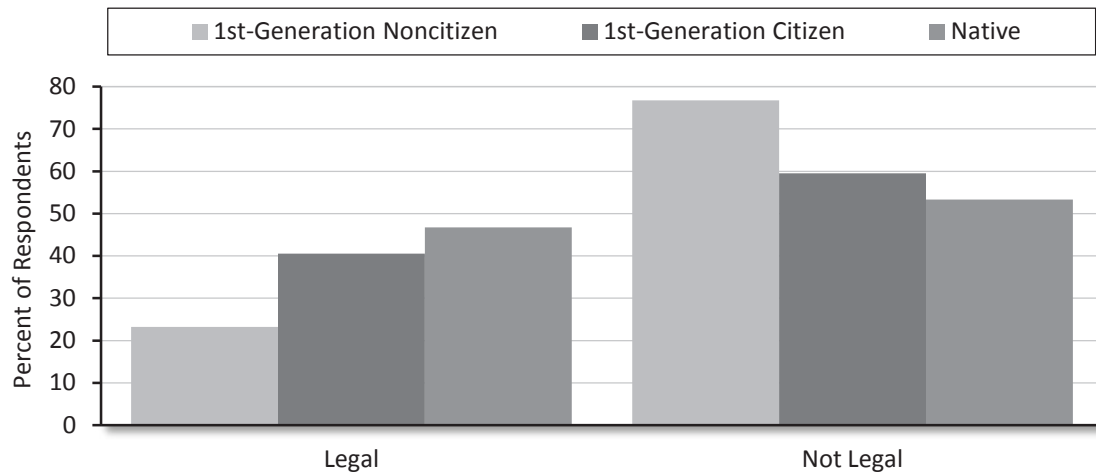
Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Figure 19
Government Should Reduce Income Differences—Immigrants by Naturalization and Each Generation of Americans



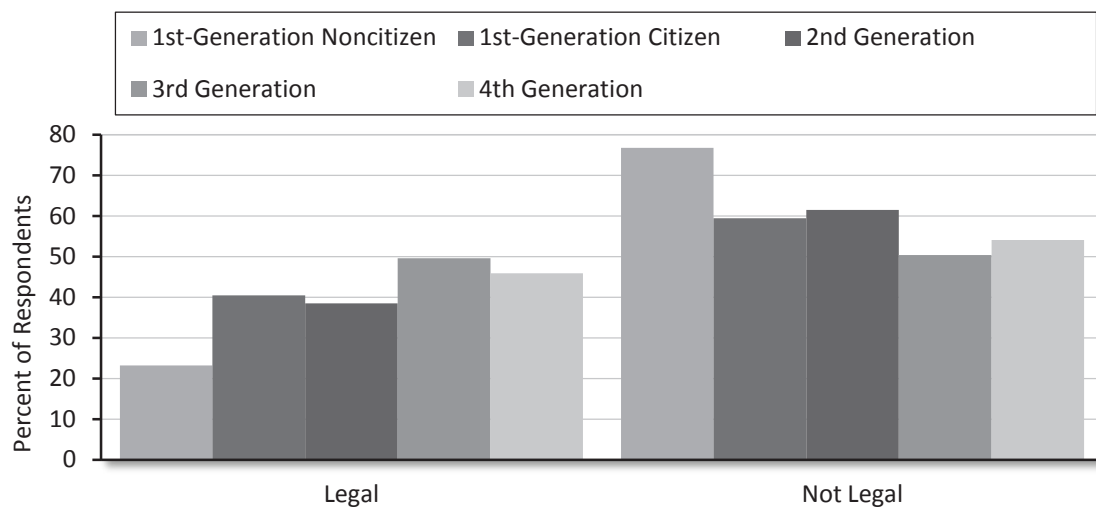
Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Figure 20
Marijuana Should be Legalized—Immigrants by Naturalization and All Natives



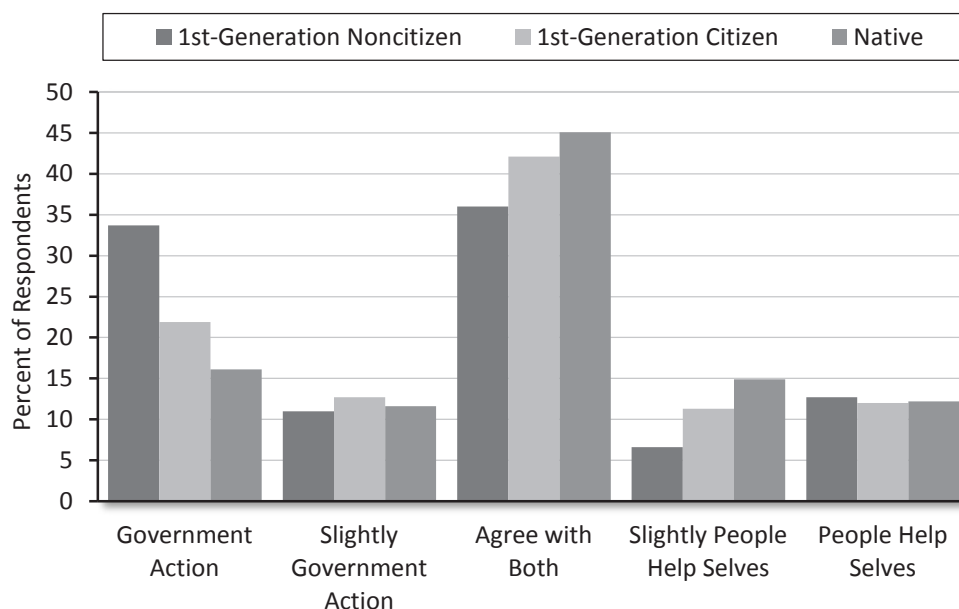
Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Figure 21
Marijuana Should be Legalized—Immigrants by Naturalization and Each Generation of Americans



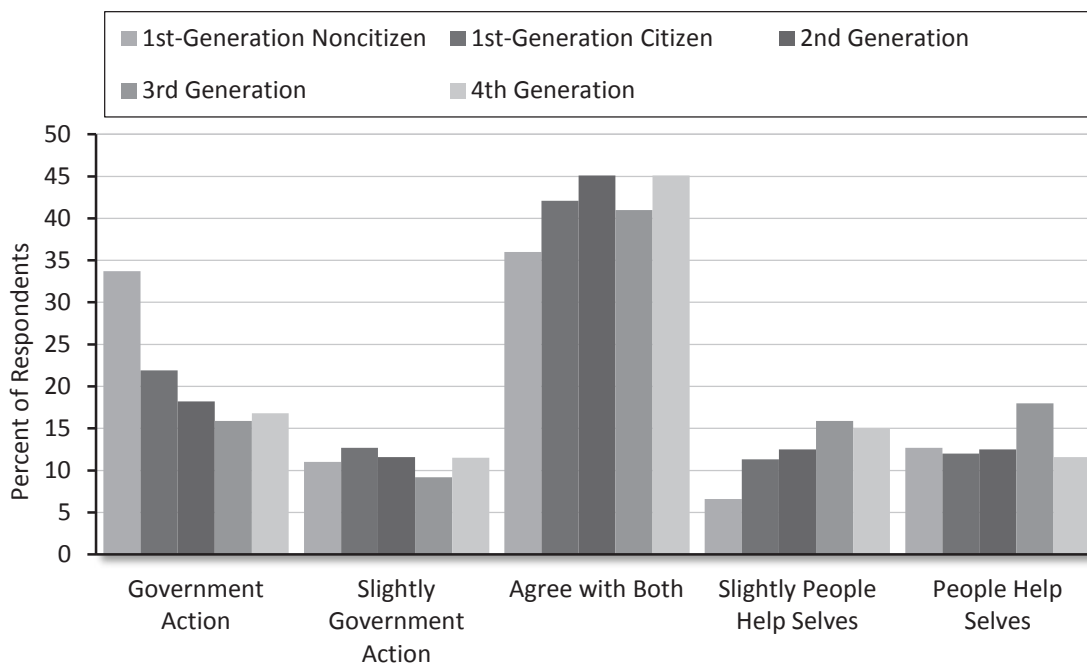
Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Figure 22
Government Assistance to the Poor—Immigrants by Naturalization and All Natives



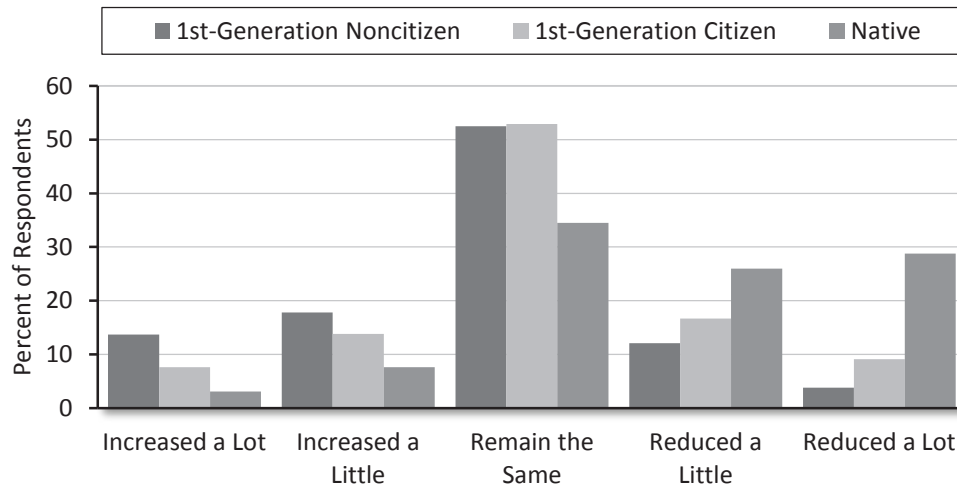
Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Figure 23
Government Assistance to the Poor—Immigrants by Naturalization and Each Generation of Americans



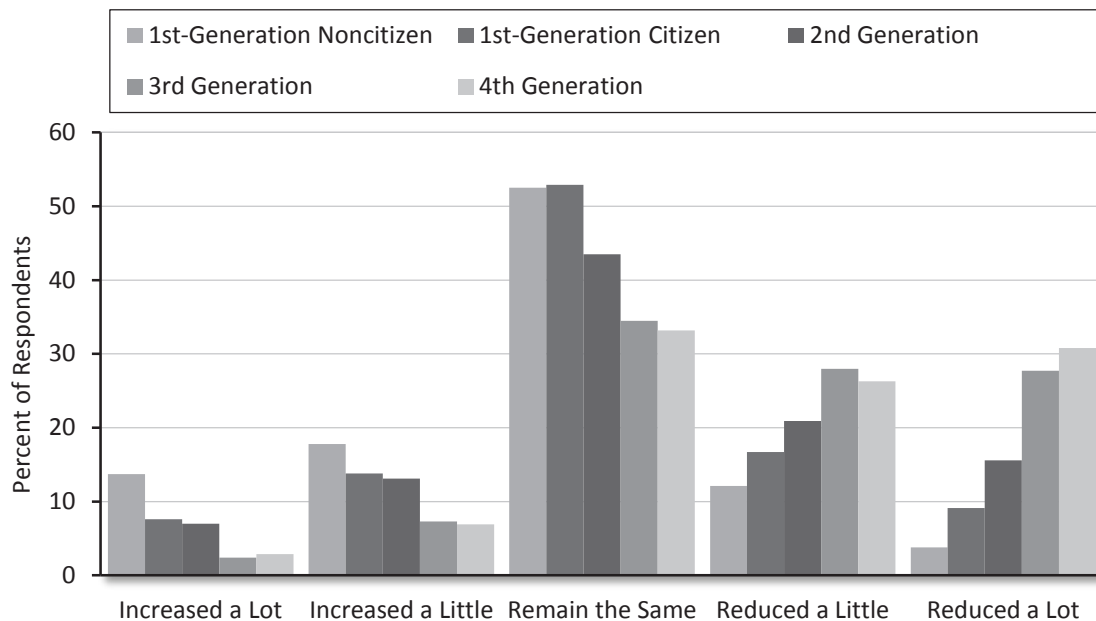
Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Figure 24
Number of Immigrants—Immigrants by Naturalization and All Natives



Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Figure 25
Number of Immigrants—Immigrants by Naturalization and Each Generation of Americans



Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey data, National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Notes

1. See Phyllis Schlafly, "Amnesty Is Republican Party Suicide," *Townhall*, October 29, 2013, <http://townhall.com/columnists/phyllisschlafly/2013/10/29/amnesty-is-republican-party-suicide-n1732723/page/full>; Eagle Forum, "How Mass (Legal) Immigration Dooms a Conservative Republican Party," *Eagle Forum Report*, January 2014, <http://www.eagleforum.org/immigration.html>; John Fonte and Althea Negai, "America's Patriotic Assimilation System Is Broken," Hudson Institute Culture and Society Briefing Paper, April 2013, <http://www.hudson.org/files/publications/Final04-05.pdf>; and James G. Gimpel, "Immigration's Impact on Republican Political Prospects, 1980 to 2012," Center for Immigration Background, April 2014.
2. Sam Wilson and Alex Nowrasteh, "The Political Assimilation of Immigrants and Their Descendants," Cato Institute Economic Development Bulletin no. 23, February 24, 2015, <http://www.cato.org/publications/economic-development-bulletin/political-assimilation-immigrants-their-descendants>.
3. Other surveys rely on ethnic self-identification to gauge immigrant political assimilation by generations. Relying on ethnic self-identification biases results against assimilation via a phenomenon called ethnic attrition. Due to assimilation and intermarriage, the descendants of immigrants are less likely to identify with their ancestors' ethnic group, thus producing ethnic attrition that systematically biases results. See Brian Duncan and Stephen J. Trejo, "Ethnic Identification, Intermarriage, and Unmeasured Progress by Mexican Americans," in *Mexican Immigration to the United States*, University of Chicago Press (May 2007), p. 263; Brian Duncan and Stephen J. Trejo, "Ancestry Versus Ethnicity: The Complexity and Selectivity of Mexican Identification in the United States," *Research in Labor Economics* 29 (2009); Richard Alba and Tariqul Islam, "The Case of the Disappearing Mexican Americans: An Ethnic-Identity Mystery," *Population Research and Policy Review* 28, no. 2 (April 2009); Brian Duncan and Stephen J. Trejo, "Intermarriage and the Intergenerational Transmission of Ethnic Identity and Human Capital for Mexican Americans," *Journal of Labor Economics* 29, no. 2 (May 2011); Brian Duncan and Stephen J. Trejo, "Tracking Intergenerational Progress for Immigrant Groups: The Problem of Ethnic Attrition," *American Economic Review* 101, no. 3 (2011); and Alex Nowrasteh "Ethnic Attrition: Why Measuring Assimilation Is Hard," *Cato at Liberty* (December 8, 2015), <http://www.cato.org/blog/ethnic-attrition-why-measuring-assimilation-hard>.
4. Begun in 1972 by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago, the General Social Survey (GSS) records respondent's political party identification, political ideology, and opinions on the spending levels of various government programs as well as the respondent's birthplace for themselves, their parents, and their grandparents. The GSS is only conducted in English, which might bias the results for the immigrants because English speakers could have political opinions that vary significantly from non-English speakers. This possible concern does not affect the second, third, and fourth generations because they are either universally fluent in English or near to it. See Pew Research Center, "Second-Generation Americans: A Portrait of the Adult Children of Immigrants," Pew Research Center, February 7, 2013, p. 49.
5. Focusing on these years allows us to analyze the political assimilation of more recent immigrants who are 79 percent nonwhite.
6. We measure statistical significance through a Pearson Chi-Square test at 95 percent confidence.
7. See Thomas M. Holbrook, *Altered States: Changing Population, Changing Parties, and the Transformation of the American Political Landscape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
8. Ibid.