

**The Upshot**  
WHO BELONGS?

# The Great Political Divide Over American Identity

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Are you an American?

Chances are your answer to this question depends on whether you have (or could get) a United States passport. That is one way many people think about what it means to be American. Another way is to think less literally and more culturally. Being an American, in this sense, can conjure images of apple pie, baseball and summer picnics. It may evoke ideas about working hard and being rewarded, or treating people equally and extending everyone opportunities. We teach these notions to schoolchildren and hold them up as essentially American.

But the 2016 election made clear that there isn't universal agreement on what it means to be an American, with restrictive views centered on ethnicity and religion playing a major role in the Trump campaign. And yet trends in public opinion suggest that the nation as a whole is moving away from an exclusionary notion of American identity.

The Democracy Fund, a bipartisan foundation that funds political research, recently put a series of questions about this topic to 8,000 people who voted in the 2012 presidential election as part of its Voter Study Group collaboration. The survey was fielded in November 2016, but it included re-interviews of people who were originally surveyed in 2011, 2012 and the summer of 2016. As John Sides, a member

of the consortium reported, the results reveal more consensus than you might expect about American identity, but also some stark differences across parties and even within them.

Among the questions: How important are things like speaking English or being born in the United States? Should it matter if someone has lived here only a short time or has non-European ancestors? What about religion — is being a Christian crucial?

Most Americans agree on certain things that are objectively important to calling yourself an American. Across party lines, there was strong support for the importance of respecting American political institutions and laws, having citizenship, and accepting people of diverse backgrounds. Well over half the people in both major political parties agree that these things are fundamental to being American. More than 90 percent of self-described Democrats think openness to diversity is important to American identity, and 80 percent of Republicans agree.

There was less consensus, but still strong support, for the importance of speaking English (75 percent of Democrats and 95 percent of Republicans thought this was important). Relatively few members of both parties linked American identity with being of European heritage (only 16 percent of Democrats and 23 percent of Republicans thought this was important).

Within the Republican Party, however, differences emerged with respect to the importance of European ancestry. Only 9 percent of G.O.P. primary voters who reported supporting John Kasich (when asked in a July 2016 wave of the survey) thought European background was important to being an American, while 16 percent of Ted Cruz's supporters, 22 percent of Marco Rubio's supporters and 30 percent of Mr. Trump's supporters thought so.

Across all primary candidates in both parties, Mr. Trump's backers stand out on this issue.

Between the parties, the most significant disagreements about American identity centered on the importance of living in America for most of one's life, being born in America and being a Christian. Forty-nine percent of Democrats thought it

was important for people who want to call themselves American to have lived here most of their lives, and 47 percent believed being born here was important. In contrast, 63 percent of Republicans weighed spending one's life here or being born here heavily. Among those who supported Mr. Trump in primary votes, those numbers rose to 69 and 72 percent.

The role of religion in American identity revealed another divide. A third of Democrats and just more than half (56 percent) of Republicans thought being a Christian was important to being an American. Within G.O.P. primary voters, Mr. Trump's voters once again stood out. Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of his primary supporters thought being a Christian was important to being an American.

The distinctive emphasis Mr. Trump's primary voters placed on the importance of European ancestry and Christianity explains a lot about the 2016 presidential battle over the meaning of America. Would America be "stronger together," as Hillary Clinton believed, or weaker because of the non-European, non-Christian people knocking on its door?

This context makes it easier to see why many people interpreted Mr. Trump's appeal to "make America great again" as a call to exclude some groups of people from belonging or feeling like Americans.

While Mr. Trump's focus on ethnicity, religion and American identity was the catalyst that united a relatively small set of Republican primary voters behind him and helped him defy expectations and become the G.O.P. nominee, nationwide trends in what is important to American identity have been moving in the opposite direction.

The General Social Survey asked these questions of a representative sample of Americans in surveys in 1996, 2004 and 2014. In 2004, people in America, on average, held views similar to Mr. Trump's primary voters: 64 percent of the population thought being Christian was important to being an American. This was up 10 points from the 53 percent who thought so in 1996, an increase most likely caused by the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

But a decade later (in 2014), the number of people who thought being Christian was important to American identity had not only gone back to where it was in 1996 but had also dropped further — nearly 10 more points — down to 44 percent on average. In the Democracy Fund study of voters in 2016, the average was 39 percent. Similarly sized drops are evident for being born in the United States and living in America for a long time.

These data clearly show that the nation as a whole is moving away from exclusionary conceptions of American identity even as Mr. Trump’s strongest supporters hold on to views that look more the way the nation did in 2004 than in 2017. They found a champion among the crowded field of candidates in 2016, but it’s important to keep in mind that only one of the many contenders for the Republican nomination embraced these views — even after it became clear they were popular with a key bloc of voters. The battle for the meaning of America is lopsided, and despite the recent success of exclusionary views, they are waning.

Lynn Vavreck, a professor of political science at U.C.L.A., is a co-author of the coming “Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America.” Follow her on Twitter at @vavreck.

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