ATTACHMENTS TO MULTIPLE COMMUNITIES AND PUBLIC AMBIVALENCE TOWARD IMMIGRATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT

In a 2010 survey, Americans expressed moderate levels of trust in their local, state, and federal governments in that order but high levels of attachment to the English language, their country, state, city, ethnic and ancestral group, the world, neighborhood, and religious group in that order. Americans expressed more ambivalent attitudes about immigrants, although responses were likely colored by long-standing controversies about illegal immigration. Higher educated and younger Americans expressed the most positive attitudes toward immigration.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans une enquête réalisée en 2010, les Américains ont exprimé des niveaux modérés de confiance dans leur gouvernement local, d'état et fédéral, dans cet ordre, mais des niveaux élevés d'attachement à la langue anglaise, à leur pays, leur état, leur ville, leur groupe ethnique et ancestral, le monde, le voisinage, et les groupes religieux dans cet ordre. Les Américains ont exprimé des attitudes plus ambivalentes au sujet des immigrants, bien que les réponses aient probablement été colorées par la controverse de longue date liée à l'immigration clandestine. Les Américains plus instruits et plus jeunes ont exprimé des attitudes plus positives envers l'immigration.

Relying mostly on 2010 data collected by the Association for Canadian Studies of a representative sample of the U.S. population, we examine degrees of attachment reported by Americans to various political and non-political communities and also analyze attitudes toward immigrants and several immigration issues. We further investigate social and demographic factors related to attachments and immigration attitudes and speculate on some possible political and policy consequences of the findings.

TRUST VERSUS ATTACHMENTS

Public trust and confidence in political institutions declined markedly during the late 1960s and early 1970s from an 80 percent range to less than 50 percent. Although trust has not rebounded, Americans still generally report high levels of trust in their federal, state, and local governments compared to citizens in some other federations (Kincaid and Cole 2011). However, Americans usually trust their local governments the most. The federal government ranks lowest; the states fall in between. The 2010 survey found 43 percent of Americans expressing "a great deal" or "fair amount" of trust in their federal government, followed by 52 percent for state governments and 55 percent for municipal governments. On questions such as "which order of government gives you the most for your money," "which order needs more power," and "which order do you trust most to deliver programs and services important to you," Americans also rate local governments the best, followed by state governments and the federal government as the worst (Konisky 2011; Cole, Kincaid, and Rodriguez 2004). Public support for the federal government has declined further since the late 1970s while support for local and state governments has increased slightly (Cole and Kincaid 2000).

Given Americans' comparatively high levels of government trust, it is not surprising that they also reported high levels of "attachment" to the United States of America, their home state or region, and their city or town (see Table 1). However, Americans' attachments to these arenas of political community are the *opposite* of their evaluations of the governments of each arena. As shown in Table 1, 91 percent of respondents reported being very or somewhat attached to the United States, while just about 80 percent were so attached to their state and nearly 74 percent so attached to their city or town.

At the same time, 44 percent of Americans considered themselves as being from their country only, 26 percent from their country but also their state, and 18 percent equally from their country and state. Furthermore, only 53 percent believed that "it is a problem for American unity when people have a state identity that is stronger than their national identity" (results not shown in tables).

These patterns are not surprising. Americans have long distinguished country from government. Attachment to country (and also the U.S. Constitution) remains extraordinarily high even when most Americans believe the government in power is ruining the country. At least since 1742 when the prominent preacher Jonathan Edwards called for "an agreement of all God's people in America" and for a union based on "love of the brethren" (quoted in Niebuhr and Heimert 1963:16-17), political leaders have emphasized affection for country (not "nation" or "state") and Constitution as the foundation of an American identity forged in a melting pot (Zangwill 1909). Although multiculturalists have tried to replace the melting-pot metaphor with the "salad-bowl" metaphor, most Americans construe their union as a covenant embracing a single people, not separate peoples.

Table 1: Attachments to Various Communities*

ATTACHMENT TO:	LEVEL OF ATTACHMENT				
	VERY	SOMEWHAT	NOT VERY	NOT AT ALL	NO RESPONSE
English Language	74.6	19.3	3.9	1.0	1.1
Combined	93.9		4.9		
Country	66.9	24.5	5.2	1.7	1.6
Combined	91.4		6.9		
State/Region	39.7	40.1	13.5	5.0	1.8
Combined	79.8		18.5		
City/Town	32.9	40.8	18.9	5.8	1.5
Combined	73.8		24.7		
Ethnic/Ancestral	34.2	34.9	19.9	8.2	2.8
Combined	69.1		28.1		
The World	26.5	41.1	23.5	5.9	3.0
Combined	67.6		29.4		
Neighborhood	27.5	38.5	24.0	9.5	1.6
Combined	66.0		32.5		
Religious Group	31.8	23.7	18.4	19.5	6.7
Combined	55.5		37.9		

* Responses ranked by degree of "very" or "somewhat" attached, so that highest level of attachment is shown to be the "English language," lowest is shown to be "religious group."

These orientations help explain why Americans are less attached to their state and locality than are citizens of many other federal countries. U.S. states and localities are congeries of individuals who choose to live there and create community through social, economic, and political interactions. Except for Indian lands, regions and localities are not sites of primordial attachment, transcendent identity, or ethnic, religious, or linguistic self-government. Americans, moreover, are highly mobile geographically. In any given year, roughly 40 million Americans report living at a different address than the year before, and roughly 20 percent of all moves from year to year occur across state boundaries (U.S. Census Bureau 2007). In turn, therefore, only about two-thirds of the American respondents reported being very or somewhat attached to their neighborhood. Given that nationalist-minded leaders since the Federalists have inveighed against the evils of sectionalism, states' rights, and local parochialism, it is surprising that Americans are not less attached to states and localities.

Statistical analyses (not shown in tables) revealed that higher proportions of older Americans reported higher levels of attachment to the United States, but not to states or localities. Higher levels of education also are related to attachment to the United States, but not to the other arenas. So too is birthplace. Those born in the United States reported higher levels of attachment to the country than did those born elsewhere. The only other statistically significant relationship is that a higher level of attachment to city or town was reported by those *not* born in the United States. Perhaps this is a function of locality as the experiential locus of assimilation into American society.

Quite fascinating, however, is that despite multicultural criticisms of the United States and the role of race as an enduring cleavage, race is not a statistically significant differentiator of attachment to country, state, or locality. By contrast, blacks are significantly more trustful of the federal government than are whites, perhaps because of the historic association of states' rights with racism (Kincaid and Cole 2008).

The survey also found 68 percent of Americans being very or somewhat attached to the world. Absent in-depth and longitudinal data, it is impossible to assess this result, although the fact that the United States is home to people from all over the world and is also the only federation that is a super-power might be relevant.

Given the high level of attachment to the United States, it is not surprising that 94 percent of Americans also felt very or somewhat attached to their language. More than 82 percent of U.S. residents speak only English at home. The next most spoken language, at 10.7 percent, is Spanish, although most Spanish-speaking parents urge their children to learn English so as to be bilingual (Stritikus and Garcia 2005). For Americans, English, which is technically a foreign language because there is no "American" language, is a tool, not an identity (Kincaid 2010).

More surprising is that 69 percent of Americans said they were very or somewhat attached to their ethnic or ancestral group—more so than respondents in Canada, Germany, and Spain. Perhaps the absence of nationalistic, linguistic, and religious struggles between peoples in the United States has enabled Americans to be comfortable retaining ethnic identities voluntarily. Given that such identities have no governmental expression (except on Indian reservations) as they do in many federations, they pose little threat to the federal polity. Furthermore, as the United States has historically sought to meld immigrants into a single people, ethnic identities remain harmless markers of differentiation. Additionally, the United States is a product of revolution based on an idea as expressed in the 1776 Declaration of Independence; hence, Americans identify with their country and their homeland, not with a fatherland, motherland, or "nation" in terms of blood lineage. This allows Americans to be attached to ancestral identities while still being attached to their country.

The lowest level of attachment reported by Americans is to "religious group," although more half (56 percent) said they were very or somewhat attached to their religion—more than Canadians, Germans, and Spaniards. Most international surveys show the United States to be one of the world's most religious countries. Three overriding factors probably contribute to this vitality. First, competition among religious groups in an environment of freedom has facilitated their vigour. Second, in many European countries and elsewhere, revolutionaries viewed religion as a major legitimator of an oppressive *ancien régime*, but most American religious groups supported revolution and federal democracy. Furthermore, religious leaders have often championed social change (e.g., the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King). Third, Americans have tended to have a messianic view of themselves, which has melded God and country into a potent symbol of unity (Kincaid 1971).

ATTITUDES TOWARD IMMIGRATION AND IMMIGRANTS

Although the United States has been termed "a nation of immigrants" (Kennedy 1964), Americans have often been ambivalent about immigrants. More than 20 million immigrants arrived between 1880 and 1920, but federal legislation in 1921 and 1924 sharply curtailed immigration, especially for all regions of the world except western and northern Europe. The Immigration Act of 1965 reopened immigration and abolished discriminatory quotas. Consequently, 38.5 million immigrants now live in the United States.

However, illegal immigration has emerged as a major controversy. Some 10.8 million illegal aliens reside in the country, and about 62 percent of them come from Mexico. Of these, 47 percent live in California, Florida, and Texas (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2010). Arguing that the federal government has done too little to enforce its own immigration laws, Arizona enacted an omnibus immigration-enforcement law in 2010. Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, South Carolina, and Utah did the same in 2011. Federal courts have enjoined enforcement of key provisions of all these laws. However, many states also have enacted laws beneficial to illegal immigrants, and the federal government has not blocked those laws.

This controversy makes it difficult to interpret surveys because advocates for illegal immigrants have successfully blurred distinctions between illegal and legal immigrants by framing the issue as merely immigration. One cannot know, therefore, whether responses to questions about "immigrants" reflect public attitudes toward legal or

illegal immigrants. Given the virtual absence of public controversy about legal immigration, question responses are probably influenced by individuals' attitudes toward illegal immigrants, most of whom are perceived, correctly, to be Mexicans.

This could be why nearly half (48 percent) of respondents agreed either "strongly" or "somewhat" that there are too many immigrants in the country. Over half (63 percent) also said recent immigrants have different values from the majority of Americans, and 38 percent agreed that "immigrants should be encouraged to give up their customs and traditions" (see Table 2).

Table 2: Immigration Attitudes

AGREEMENT OR DISAGREEMENT WITH THE FOLLOWING:	STRONGLY AGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	STRONGLY AGREE	N/A
There are too many immigrants in my country	24.1	23.6	19.8	19.3	13.2
Combined	47.7		39.1		
Recent immigrants have different values from that of the majority of the country	24.0	38.6	18.7	6.7	11.9
Combined	62.6		25.4		
Immigrants should be encouraged to give up their customs and traditions	15.2	22.7	29.6	23.1	9.4
Combined	37.9		52.7		

Nevertheless, compared to Canadian, German, and Spanish respondents, Americans were the least likely to say that immigrants have different values and should give up their customs and traditions. These responses seem consistent with our previous finding that Americans were the most likely to express attachment to their ethnic or ancestral group. Furthermore, 69 percent of Americans strongly or somewhat agreed that "people with different ethnic and religious backgrounds than the majority make an important contribution to" American culture, while 72 percent agreed that there are shared American values, and 64 percent reported shared values in their state.

At the same time, among the four surveyed countries, Americans were the least likely (50 percent) to agree that "all children born in the United States should automatically be granted citizenship irrespective of their parents' citizenship status." This response is quite likely a reaction to illegal immigration and to news stories about "anchor babies" and "birth tourists."

Combining the three items shown in Table 2 into a single scale of "immigration attitudes" and treating this scale as the dependent variable (where high scores represent more "pro" immigration attitudes), Table 3 sheds some light on demographic factors related to these views.

Table 3: OLS Regression Model Explaining Immigration Attitudes as a Function of Various Socio-Demographic Variables

DEPENDENT VARIABLE = SCALE OF IMMIGRATION ATTITUDES (HIGH SCORE = POSITIVE ATTITUDES) SCALE OF IMMIGRATION ATTITUDES (HIGH SCORE=POSITIVE ATTITUDES)			
INDEPENDENT VARIABLES	B	BETA	SIG.
Born in US? (1=yes, 2=no)	.150	.013	.010
Gender (1=male, 2=female)	.429	.090	.010
Age	-.103	-.152	.000
Income	.087	.969	NS
Education	.294	.199	.000
Race (1=white, 2=Black)	.409	.045	NS
Hispanic? (1=yes, 2=no)	.119	.011	NS
Region (south=reference)			
North	.224	.039	NS
Midwest	.579	.105	.01
West	-.008	-.001	NS
Constant	4.506		.000
R	.301		
R^2	.091 (.079 adjusted)		

Demographic characteristics contributing to statistically significant *positive* scores on the immigration scale are female gender, higher levels of education, and Midwest residency. Demographic characteristics contributing to *negative* scores are male gender and age. Of these factors, the most important are education and age. Higher educated and younger Americans far more often reported positive immigration attitudes than did others.

Interesting also are the factors not related to the immigration scale. Neither place of birth (born in the United States or not) nor race or Hispanic status contribute significantly to scores on the scale. Scores of respondents from the West are negative relative to the scores of respondents from all other regions, but the difference is not statistically significant.

CONCLUSION

Despite today's political polarization, which has reached an unprecedented level in the U.S. Congress, and the "culture wars" pitting traditionalists and religionists against progressives and secularists, the U.S. survey suggests a strong underlying stability as reflected in public attachments to country, state, and locality. Quite important, moreover, is that race is not a significant differentiator of attachment. Also, even though slightly more than half of Americans said that a state identity stronger than national identity would be "a problem for American unity," only one percent considered themselves to be from their state only, and only 5 percent said they were from their state but also from their country. This underlying attitudinal stability about fundamental matters mitigates the divisiveness of political conflict.

The results also suggest a culture compatible with federalism as an expression of unity and diversity and with the United States as "compound republic," to use James Madison's phrase in *Federalist* 51, which is neither wholly confederal nor wholly national. Americans express high levels of attachment to their country and their shared language while simultaneously expressing high levels of attachment to their ancestral and religious groups.

Although attitudes toward immigrants are tainted by controversies over illegal immigration, it seems safe to conclude that Americans are ambivalent about immigration but not hostile to immigrants. While 63 percent said immigrants have different values from most Americans, 69 percent agreed that people with different ethnic and religious backgrounds than the majority make important contributions to American culture. These results suggest that, despite polarization among elites and activists over immigration policy, most Americans would be receptive to a compromise resolution of immigration issues that would not be punitive for illegal residents.

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