What Americans Think About Race and Ethnicity

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THE UNITED STATES faces two big challenges in ethnic relations: moving to further eradicate the bitter racial legacy that began with slavery and Jim Crow; and successfully assimilating into an increasingly diverse American family millions of new immigrants, drawn heavily from Central and South America, and Asia. Both areas have problems and tensions aplenty. Norman Hill, president of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, has reminded readers of an inescapable fact of American history—that African Americans are the only ethnic group that was brought here against its will "as chattel," and then faced another century of institutionalized racism, known as Jim Crow.[1] Even the wisest of subsequent policies could not have swept away this tragic legacy, and U.S. policies on race over the last half century have often not been the most enlightened. On immigration, this country's fabled melting pot has achieved extraordinary successes in making *e pluribus unum* a substantial reality rather than a pious wish. Still, each major wave of immigration has brought with it conflict between newcomers and older, established groups. The present wave is no exception.

We know that problems still abound in ethnic relations. What we need

to know is how things are trending. How successful is the contemporary United States in reducing ethnic-based animosity—in giving one of the country's oldest groups, African Americans, a surer sense of opportunity and progress, and its own responsibility, and convincing new immigrants that the promise of American life is for them and the future, not a thing of the past?

The Debate over Racial Progress

Events in America's race relations have periodically prompted fear that we are losing ground. In the midst of the civil rights protests of the late 1960s, a presidential commission chaired by Illinois Governor Otto Kerner concluded that the United States was "moving toward two societies, one black, one white."[2] In 1995, following the verdict in the O. J. Simpson case, a bevy of news magazines and commentators concluded that the Commission's prophecy had been realized. A huge literature on American race relations has appeared in recent years, with authors offering sharply divergent interpretations of whether data show a narrowing or a widening of this largest-of-all ethnic divide. Andrew Hacker has forcefully argued the "two societies" thesis; Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom have found great progress in black-white relations and in the status of African Americans—much more than is usually acknowledged.[3]

A Lessening of the Divide

For more than two decades now, my colleagues and I at the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research have been examining survey findings on ethnic relations. These data show unequivocally that both African Americans and their fellow citizens who are called whites see the country's race relations in terms far more complex and ambiguous than "two societies" envision them. As we would expect, given their experience, those who are called blacks are much more inclined than others to emphasize the problems racism has bequeathed. But they now see comity along

with conflict, opportunity as well as discrimination, progress together with persisting difficulties. And like others, African Americans find that the problems confronting their communities in the 1990s have roots running far deeper than present discrimination and requiring new solutions. For all the legacy of pain and anger, separation and name-calling, stereotyping and oversimplification, many Americans see race relations today in hues vastly more subtle than black and white. Let us look at the survey record.

The Legacy of the Past

Because they have felt racism as others have not, African Americans remain today more insistent on the assumption of national responsibility for remedies. They are more inclined than any other group to back calls for government efforts at remediation. Asked, for example, whether we are spending "too much, too little, or about the right amount" on assistance to blacks, two-thirds (65 percent) of African Americans told interviewers for the National Opinion Research Center in 1996 that we're spending too little, a position taken by less than one-fifth (17 percent) of whites. A Gallup poll of early 1997 found whites by roughly two to one saying that government should not make any special effort to help minorities because they should help themselves, blacks by a virtually identical two-to-one majority saying that the national government should make every effort to improve the position of blacks and other minorities.

Though a majority of African Americans say that they have never personally been denied a job or promotion because of their race, the proportion who claim that they have (44 percent) is more than three times that of whites (13 percent; survey by ABC News and the *Washington Post*, March 16–19, 1998). It is not surprising, then, that blacks are much more supportive than whites of affirmative action programs designed to give compensatory preference to minorities. Hispanic Americans are more inclined to endorse affirmative action than non-Hispanic whites but are significantly less so than blacks (Fig. 1).

Beyond Victimization

Yet if African Americans more than other groups see the need for special federal remedial efforts, many in the community now reject the view that their problems are primarily white inflicted. Asked in October 1995 in a Yankelovich Partners survey for *Time*/CNN whether they think "the problems that most blacks face are caused primarily by whites," only 30 percent of blacks (and 13 percent of whites) said they are. An NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll conducted that same month found only 25 percent of African Americans saying that the most important step in improving race relations involves "white Americans doing more to recognize and reduce racism by whites against blacks."

Perhaps the most dramatic evidence of African Americans' rejecting victimization as a prime or sufficient explanation for their community's problems comes from surveys taken by Yankelovich Partners for *Time* and CNN in September 1997. Along with regular national samples of white and black adults, the survey added special samples of teenagers. These studies show dramatic generational changes, away from historical stereotypes of the respective groups. For example, while a clear majority of black adults

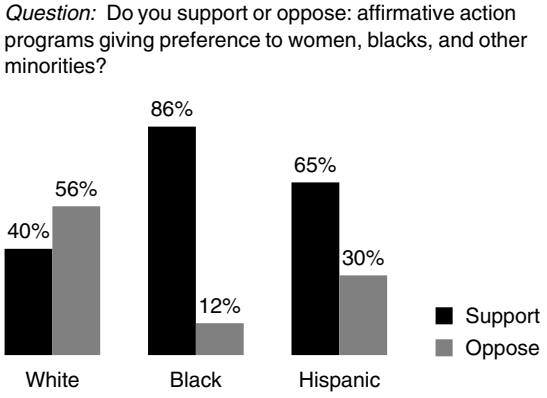


Fig. 1. Opinions of affirmative action programs; survey by ABC News/*Washington Post*, August 1–5, 1996.

attribute black Americans having worse jobs, income, and housing (compared with whites) "mainly . . . to discrimination," a solid majority of black teens reject this view (Fig. 2A). This difference seems to result in large part from contrasting generational experiences: whereas a slight majority of adult blacks said they had been victims of racial discrimination, only one black teen in four said he or she had been. Moreover, a large majority of adult blacks think most whites consider blacks inferior, a majority of black teens do not think so.

Important generational shifts are also evident in the white population. A large majority of white adults said that failure to take advantage of

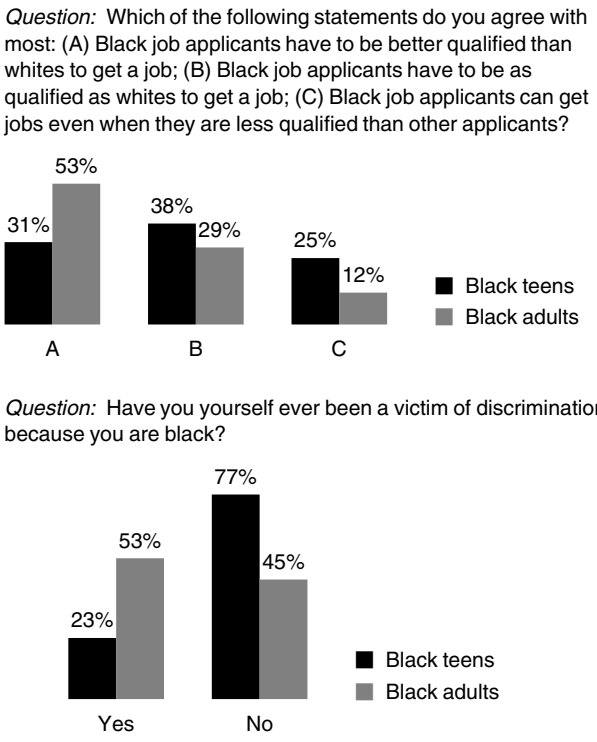


Fig. 2A. Black attitudes and experience on discrimination; survey by Yankelovich Partners, Inc., for *Time*/CNN, September 23–October 2, 1997.

opportunities is a greater problem for black Americans today than discrimination by whites. Among teens it was reversed: a large plurality of white teenagers called discrimination by whites the greater problem for black Americans (Fig. 2B).

The last chart in Figure 2 (Fig. 2C) confounds expectations about current racial attitudes. All four groups—teens and adults—reject the idea that the problems most black Americans face are caused primarily by whites. Black teenagers are as inclined to this stance as are white adults. White teenagers are more likely than black teenagers to attribute black Americans' problems to whites' prejudice and discrimination. Over half of the black teens think members of their community have worse jobs, income, and so on because "most blacks don't have the motivation or will to pull themselves up out of their poverty"; only 24 percent of white teens take this view.

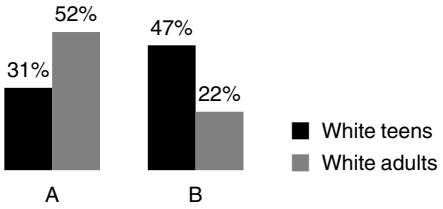
These extraordinary findings reflect a growing tendency on the part of both groups, especially the young among them, to reject past racial stereotypes and easy, self-serving answers. Both white and black teenagers seem to have moved toward accepting their own group's responsibility for racial problems, rather than dismissing the problems as simply "their fault."

Comity and Opportunity

Few blacks or whites believe that a satisfactory state has been reached in racial comity, but judgments are far from bleak. In a Gallup survey conducted in June 1998, 59 percent of African Americans said that "only a few" of their group dislike whites; 27 percent attributed that stance to "many" African Americans, and only 5 percent to most. The responses were almost identical when whites were asked to assess blacks' feelings toward them. Only 20 percent of black respondents told Gallup interviewers in October 1995 that they believe most white people "want to keep blacks down."

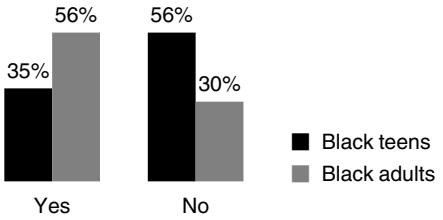
Many blacks see progress and greater opportunity. For example, in a

Question: In your view, which of the following is more of a problem for black Americans today: (A) failure to take advantage of available opportunities, or (B) discrimination by whites?



Question: On the average, black Americans have worse jobs, income, and housing than white people. Do you think these differences are . . .

. . . mainly due to discrimination?



. . . mainly because most blacks don't have the motivation or will power to pull themselves up out of their poverty?

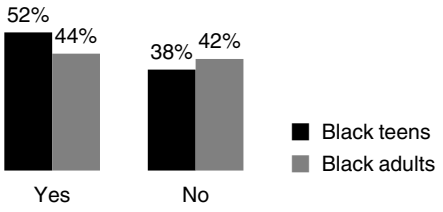


Fig. 2B. Generational attitude of blacks and whites on questions of discrimination; survey by Yankelovich Partners, Inc., for *Time*/CNN, September 23–October 2, 1997.

survey taken for the *Washington Post* in the summer of 1996, although 45 percent of black respondents said that they have less opportunity than whites to live a middle-class life, 44 percent said they have about the same degree of opportunity, and 6 percent that they have even more. Sixty-five percent of blacks, compared with 63 percent of whites, told interviewers for the National Opinion Research Center in the spring of 1996 that "people like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living."

Integration and Shared Values

What is perhaps most striking in our survey findings is the increase in the proportion of white and blacks alike reporting interaction with members of the other group as friends and neighbors. For example, ABC News and the *Washington Post* have asked whites on a number of occasions since 1981, most recently in 1997, whether they know any African American whom they consider a fairly close personal friend, and the counterpart question (for African Americans) on white friends. We now report many more cross-group friendships than we did a decade ago (Fig. 3). Similarly, surveys taken by the National Opinion Research Center of the

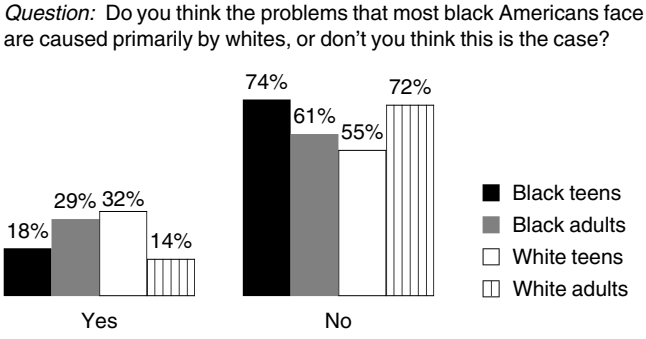


Fig. 2C. White responsibilities—blacks and whites compared; survey by Yankelovich Partners, Inc., for *Time*/CNN, September 23–October 2, 1997.

University of Chicago since the late 1970s show a fairly steady increase in the proportion of whites reporting that they live in neighborhoods with blacks (Fig. 4). The same NORC surveys show a big gain in support for open housing laws—from 37 percent in 1978 supporting legislation that says "a homeowner cannot refuse to sell to someone because of their race or color," to 65 percent backing it in 1996 (Fig. 5).

In a survey taken by Gallup in January and February 1997, only 24 percent of white respondents said they would rather live in a neighborhood with white families only; 61 percent said that if they could find the housing they wanted they would rather live in a neighborhood that had both blacks and whites. In the same study, just 7 percent of blacks opted for a neighborhood exclusively black; 83 percent preferred one that was racially

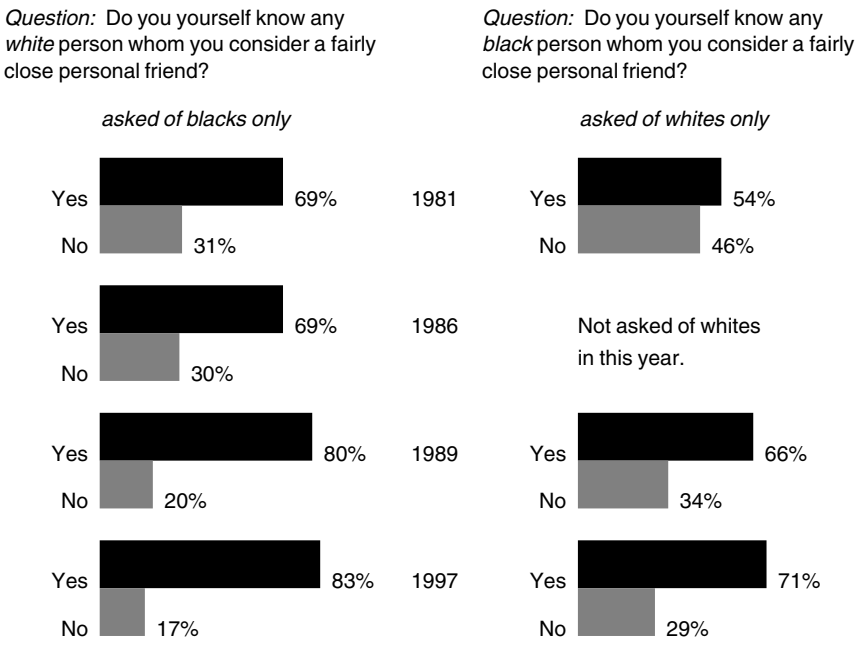


Fig. 3. Cross-group friendships, 1981–1997; survey by ABC News/*Washington Post*, latest that of June 5–8, 1997.

integrated. Such findings need to be viewed cautiously and interpreted carefully. Saying one is committed to integrated housing is now the only acceptable professed norm; some almost certainly opt for it in polls who would not follow it in real life. But professed norms are themselves important. The proportion of Americans living in integrated neighborhoods is on the increase, in fact, and residential integration as a norm has gained substantially.

For all the bitter history of black-white relations in the U.S., the two groups share the same underlying values. There is, then, a real base on which to build better relations. Norman Hill of the A. Philip Randolph Institute finds it remarkable "that blacks, who bear the legacy of slavery, segregation, oppression, exclusion, and the daily indignities of racism are, in many ways, the most resilient archetypal Americans, still holding on to the notion that perseverance and hard work will give them a real shot at opportunity and equality."[4] It is indeed remarkable, though not, I think, surprising. There is broad ideological agreement across the American people on such basic ideals as a distinctive understanding of equality—pegged to opportunity rather than results—and a sense that the American system,

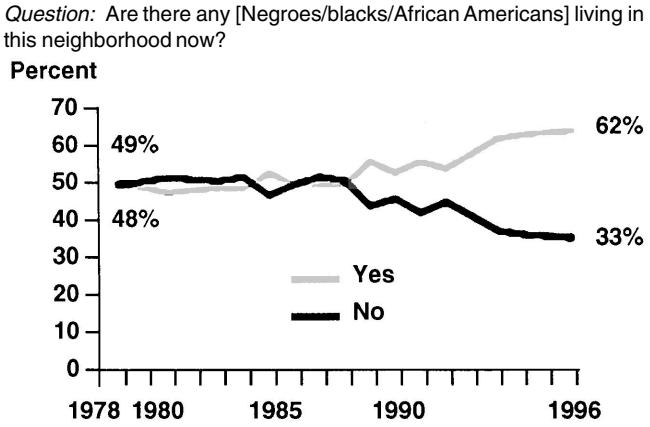


Fig. 4. Changes in neighborhood integration, 1978–1996; surveys by the National Opinion Research Center-General Social Survey.

for all its faults, does much to extend opportunity. Asked, for example, in a *Los Angeles Times* survey of October 1995 which statement is closer to their opinion, "In the United States today, anyone who works hard enough can make it economically," or "No matter how hard you work you just can't make it economically in this country today," a large majority of blacks took the "anyone can make it" position. The proportion of whites taking that position was higher than that of blacks, but only modestly so.

Immigration and Changing Ethnic Backgrounds

Since its founding, the United States has grappled with vast problems and inequities in black-white relations. But along with this enduring cleavage there has been a series of shifting ethnic group conflicts and accommodations, prompted by succeeding waves of immigration. The

Question: Suppose there is a community-wide vote on the general housing issue. There are two possible laws to vote on. Which law would you vote for? (A) One law says that a homeowner can decide for himself whom to sell his house to, even if he prefers not to sell to [Negroes/ blacks/African Americans]. (B) The second law says that a homeowner cannot refuse to sell to someone because of their race or color.

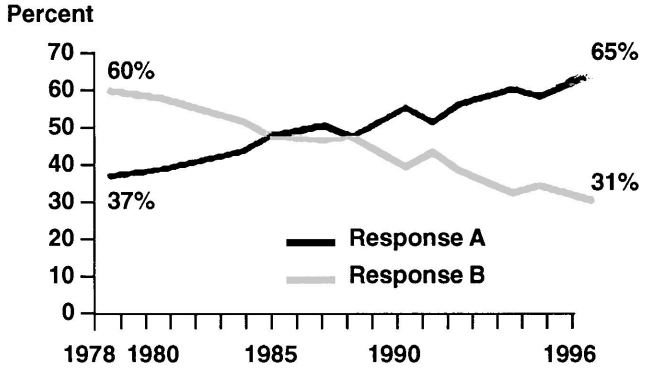


Fig. 5. Attitudes toward open housing laws, 1978–1996; surveys by the National Opinion Research Center-General Social Survey.

U.S. is highly diverse ethnically, yet for all this heterogeneity, it is a *nation*, not just a collection of separate ethnic groups. It is hardly surprising, given our need to create and maintain a nation on the lines *e pluribus unum* describes, that we have periodically worried about our ability to maintain and indeed enhance "one nation" status.

G. K. Chesterton described the continuing challenge in his brilliant opening chapter of *What I Saw in America*.[5] Chesterton wrote of "the great American experiment; the experiment of a democracy of diverse races which has been compared to a melting pot." This experiment naturally puts great pressure on the vessel: "That metaphor implies that the pot itself is of a certain shape and a certain substance; a pretty solid substance. The melting pot must not melt." How well is the pot holding now, as a new century begins?

After a period of low immigration that followed a vast tightening of American immigration law in the 1920s, legal immigration was again expanded in the 1960s. In recent years, too, substantial numbers of immigrants have entered the country illegally. As a result, the foreign-born population of the U.S. has climbed—from 5.4 percent in 1960 to 9.3 percent in 1996. And, far more than their predecessors, recent immigrants have come from Latin America and from Asia.

Worries about the impact of the new waves of immigration on national unity and values should be greatly tempered by the fact that such concerns have proved ill founded in previous periods, when rates of immigration relative to the base population exceeded those of the present day. They should also be greatly diminished, if not dismissed, by recent survey findings that show newcomers to America committed to its values and confident of their chance to succeed in their adopted home.

In mid-1995, Gallup surveyed a national cross-section of all adult Americans and large samples of immigrants—including "most recent arrivals" who have been in the U.S. ten years or less. The survey found that the immigrants closely resemble the entire adult population on most matters of policy and values. For example, 59 percent of all adults and 59

percent of immigrants (including 57 percent of the most recent arrivals) said national policy should encourage immigrants "to blend into American culture by giving up some important aspects of their own culture." Only 32 percent of all adults and 26 percent of recent immigrants favored encouraging immigrants "to maintain their own culture more strongly." The idea of the U.S. as a melting pot "in which people of different cultures combine into a unified American culture" was endorsed by a full three-quarters of the immigrant population.

The Gallup survey found immigrants even more likely than other Americans to see the country as a land of opportunity: 93 percent of the immigrants surveyed agreed with the statement that "people who work hard to better themselves can get ahead in this country," the position of 85 percent of the entire population. Immigrants overwhelmingly described the reception they received upon arrival as welcoming—by margins of nine to one and better.[6] Looking ahead, three immigrants in every four said they expect their children to have even better economic opportunities in the U.S. than they themselves have had, and that the children will face even less discrimination.

On such matters as the opportunity for themselves and their children to find good jobs, the amount of political freedom, and the chances of being treated fairly under the law, immigrants of all arrival times gave the U.S. extraordinarily positive marks. Seventy-five percent of the immigrants called the U.S. better than their homeland in the amount of political freedom; only 5 percent ranked it lower on this dimension than their place of birth. In two areas, however—feeling safe from crime, and the moral tenor of the society—the U.S. got quite low marks. Only 33 percent said the U.S. was better than their homeland in realizing moral values; 48 percent ranked it lower.

What is most important, we see no signs in the survey findings of a serious split between immigrant newcomers and longer-term residents. States like California and Texas, which have experienced heavy immigration in recent years, certainly have had conflict on issues like bilingual education.

But in all important regards this latest great wave of immigration to the United States resembles the earlier ones. The bulk of the new immigrants seek integration into their new nation and espouse its ideals.

Taking Yes for the Answer

Societies sometimes find themselves inclined to resist good news. Developments in ethnic relations in the United States are now a case in point. It is not hard to see why the extent of the positive trends is resisted. Long-standing tensions and prejudice, especially involving whites and blacks, have been the unhappiest chapter in American historical experience. Stressing the positive now may seem an attempt to gloss over past wrongs and minimize current needs. Against the backdrop of problems as wrenching as those that have surrounded race relations, no analyst wants to be cast in the role of Pollyanna.

Nonetheless, tensions in American ethnic relations have diminished in recent decades. All the groups making up the American mosaic appear more positive and optimistic today than they were when the civil rights revolution began. Set against the standard of where we would like our society to be, the present mix of ethnic group attitudes and relations leaves much ground to be covered. But set against past experience—indeed that of any previous point since the country's founding—today's ethnic relations manifest striking progress.

Notes

1. Norman Hill, "Race in America—Through a Glass, Darkly," *Public Perspective*, February/March 1996, pp. 1–4.

2. National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *Report* (New York: Bantam, 1968), p. 1.

3. Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (New York: Scribner's, 1992); Stephan Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom, *America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

4. Hill, p. 3.

5. G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1922; repr. 1968, Da Capo Press).

6. The survey reported on here was taken by the Gallup organization for CNN and *USA Today*, May 25–June 4, 1995.