U.S. Immigrants’ Attitudes
Toward Libertarian Values

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Abstract

While there has been much discussion of libertarians’ (generally although not universally favorable) attitudes toward liberal immigration policies, the attitudes of immigrants to the United States toward libertarian values have not previously been examined. Using data from the 2010 General Social Survey, we asked how American-born and foreign-born residents differed in attitudes toward a variety of topics upon which self-reported libertarians typically hold strong pro-liberty views (as described by Iyer et al., 2012). The results showed a marked pattern of lower support for pro-liberty views among immigrants as compared to US-born residents. These differences were generally statistically significant and sizable, with a few scattered exceptions. With increasing proportions of the US population being foreign-born, low support for libertarian values by foreign-born residents means that the political prospects of libertarian values in the US are likely to diminish over time.
Libertarians in the United States have long tended to favor lenient immigration policies, with some going so far as to advocate the notion of "open borders" (Caplan, 2012). This naturally raises the question: What are immigrants’ attitudes toward libertarian views and libertarian perspectives? Interestingly, this question does not appear to have been examined empirically. The current study explores this issue using the data from the 2010 General Social Survey.

Libertarianism

In one of the few empirical examinations of the moral and political attitudes of libertarians, Iyer et al. (2012) examined a large web-based sample of approximately 12,000 self-identified libertarians, and observed that compared to either liberals or conservatives, they were characterized by a "stronger endorsement of individual liberty as their foremost guiding principle, and weaker endorsement of all other moral principles". Based on their findings, Iyer created a new scale measuring endorsement of liberty as a moral principle (see Appendix 1). This scale was used to guide the examination of data in the current study.

Current Study

The General Social Survey (GSS) collects data on on the demographic characteristics and social and political attitudes of people residing in the United States. The survey began in 1974 and has included periodic samples in subsequent years. The GSS has been the basis for at least 14,000 publications. The present study relies primarily upon the 28th round of the survey, conducted in 2010. This sample which consisted of 4,898 individuals of whom 551 answered that they were not born in the United States (GSS question #5 BORN). We shall call those respondents who claimed that they were born in America as “ABRs” (i.e. American-Born Respondents) while those who indicated that they were not born in the U.S. as “FBR”s (Foreign-Born Respondents).

Using Iyer et al.’s Liberty Item scale as a guide, we examined the General Social Survey to identify questions relating to topics included on the scale. This examination turned up 10 pertinent questions, lying within the following four categories (a) individual freedom of speech, (b) drug laws, (c) laws on publication of erotic materials, (d) affirmative action, and (e) governmental activism relating to income inequality. Planned comparisons were conducted to compare ABRs versus FBRs on each of these measures.

Individual Freedom of Expression

The GSS contains 15 questions specifically focused on freedom of expression. The questions ask about whether 5 hypothetical sorts of individuals whose views many people would disapprove of (namely, an “atheist”, a “communist”, a “racist”, a “homosexual” or an “anti-US Muslim”) should be allowed to speak or teach on a college campus. A final question asked
whether a book espousing such views (i.e., atheist, communist, racist, homosexual, or anti-US Muslim views) should be allowed in a library.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents saying “yes” for the foreign-born individuals in the sample and for the US-born individuals. Note that only a subset of all respondents were asked each of these questions, although in all cases (except for the question dealing with allowing Muslim clergymen preaching hatred of the US, which has slightly lower numbers overall) there were over 350 FBRs and 2,800 ABRs.

The green bars show percentage of US born endorsing free expression; the orange bars show the same thing for foreign born residents. The quantities in each are averaged over the three categories of question (speak, teach and publish.)

Support for Free Expression

![Support for Free Expression](image)

Category of "Potentially Undesirable" Speech

The differences were all statistically significant (see chi square values under figure) except for the question on homosexuals.
**Drug Laws**

The GSS contains only one question on drug laws, asking the respondent whether “the use of marijuana” should be legalized (see Figure 2). The difference between ABRs (47.5% endorsement) versus FBRs (32.9% endorsement) was significant, $\chi^2 = 27.41$, $p < .0001$. A similar check for respondents whose parents were born outside of America (but not necessarily the respondents themselves) showed almost the exact same differences as well. This difference is interesting since FBRs tend to be more liberal on average than ABRs (average self-described political views scores: 4.13 for ABR and 3.90 for FBR on 1-7 liberal to conservative scale in question “polviews”) and self-described liberals are much more likely than self-described conservatives to support legalizing marijuana.

**Support for Marijuana Legalization**

![Support for Marijuana Legalization Chart]

**Publication of Erotic Materials**

Respondents to the GSS were asked whether pornography should be banned in general, banned for all under 18, or legal for everyone. 34.43% of ABRs said pornography should be illegal under all circumstances while only 31.84% of FBRs said the same. The option "illegal under some circumstances" was chosen by 62.44% of ABRs and 63.43% of FBRs. These differences were not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 3.30$, $p = .192$), so the GSS provides no evidence for a difference between ABRs and FBRs on this issue.
**Affirmative Action**

Libertarians generally reject preferential policies which extend preferences to groups based on historical injustice or numerical underrepresentation (e.g., Nozick, 1974). In a question asking specifically whether or not the respondent favored preferences in hiring blacks, a four-point scale was used to either strongly support, support, oppose, or strongly oppose such preferences. Such policies were strongly opposed by 53.8% of people born in the US, but only 45.9% of those born outside the US. The policies were strongly supported by 11.9% of those born outside the US and 10.2% of those born in the US. Overall, 23.76% of FBRs supported racial preferences while 18.27% of ABRs did. While modest, the difference was significant, $\chi^2 = 9.52$, p=.023.

**Governmental Activism to Mitigate Income Inequality**

Libertarians tend to favor reductions in the scope of government activity, and specifically reject attempts to minimize wealth inequality (Boaz, 1997). Two questions in the 2010 GSS bear specifically on these issues. The first asked whether government should do more or less to solve problems and was coded from “1” (govt. should do much more) to “5” (govt. should do much less). The average for FBR was 2.75 while the average for ABR was 3.18. This difference was significant, $\chi^2=53.70$ (p<0.001).

The GSS contained another question asking whether or not the government should do more to reduce income inequality, with the responses coded from a scale of 1 (strong yes) to 7 (strong no). The average for FBR was 3.64 while the average for ABR was 4.04, $\chi^2=22.63$ ($p = 0.01$) so it appears to be significant, again showing greater foreign-born interest in activist government.

**Conclusions & Limitations**

The results suggest a strong and seemingly rather general tendency for immigrants to the US to shun libertarian views, when compared to US-born respondents. Exceptions include tolerance for free expression by homosexuals (where a trend for less tolerance by foreign-born respondents did not reach statistical significance) and tolerance for publication of erotic materials (where no significant differences emerged.)

A number of limitations of this study should be noted.

The General Social Survey sample may, when compared against the total population, include relatively fewer individuals who violated US law to get into the country or to remain there (i.e., "illegal" or "undocumented" immigrants.) Thus, the results may overestimate (or underestimate) the extent to which immigrants as a whole differ from the rest of the population in rejecting libertarian values.
The GSS does not cover all of the topics upon which Iyer et al. (2012) found distinctive libertarian viewpoints; it is possible that on other, unmeasured, liberty issues, immigrants may not differ from US-born respondents (or might differ in a different way than what is noted here.)

The results do not make it clear why immigrants tend to find libertarian perspectives unattractive, relative to the views of US born individuals. We have done some exploratory regression analyses computing partial correlations for the relationship of immigrant status and libertarian values, equating religion, income, and other variables. The results suggest an effect of immigrant status which cannot be accounted for by these other covariates. The results are not being presented in detail here, however, not only because the tests were post-hoc and exploratory, but also because—in the view of the present author—the notion of an effect of immigrant status per se apart from cultural and personal factors associated with being born in another country may not be meaningful. Being born in a given place is probably best conceived of as an ensemble of correlated causal inputs rather than a distinct causal input whose impact can be statistically (much less experimentally) isolated from the other cultural and social variables that are correlated with it. (For this reason, a random assignment study seems not only impractical, but also inherently ill-defined.)

These limitations notwithstanding, the results show a strong and non-obvious pattern. The findings may have a rather ironic implication: while enthusiastic believers in libertarian philosophy often speak fondly about the impact of immigration upon the US economy and society (e.g., Caplan, 2012), the ultimate political impact of continuing immigration (and possible legalization of the status of undocumented immigrants) may hold in store a rude shock for libertarians and libertarian-sympathizers.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX 1

Liberty Items from Iyer et al. (2012)

**Economic/Government Liberty:**

Whether or not private property was respected (relevance rating)

People who are successful in business have a right to enjoy their wealth as they see fit

Society works best when it lets individuals take responsibility for their own lives without telling them what to do.

The government interferes far too much in our everyday lives.

The government should do more to advance the common good, even if that means limiting the freedom and choices of individuals. (Reverse scored)

Property owners should be allowed to develop their land or build their homes in any way they choose, as long as they don't endanger their neighbors.

**Lifestyle Liberty:**

Whether or not everyone was free to do as they wanted. (relevance rating)

I think everyone should be free to do as they choose, so long as they don't infringe upon the equal freedom of others.

People should be free to decide what group norms or traditions they themselves want to follow.