

The Politics of Belonging: Generational Differences in Immigrant Issue Priorities During the 2024 Elections

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Abstract

This study examines the different assimilation theories and how generational status shapes issue prioritization in the United States. Drawing on an original, nationwide survey conducted after the 2024 elections, the analysis examines variations in issue salience across generational divides, highlighting the interplay between cultural heritage and political assimilation. By focusing on key areas such as healthcare, the economy, national security, foreign policy, immigration, the environment, abortion, and education, the study sheds light on the unique priorities of these groups and how they compare to the general electorate. I find that second-generation immigrants occupy a middle ground between retaining first-generation concerns and aligning with the broader electorate. Additionally, results show that demographic factors also frequently emerged as stronger predictors of issue prioritization than generational status alone. Overall, the study highlights the complexity of immigrant political behavior and demonstrates that immigrant communities cannot be understood as politically uniform groups.

Introduction

In recent decades, immigration in the United States has surpassed natural increase as the primary driver of population growth (Frey 2024), resulting in a more diverse electorate with evolving political priorities. The influx of new arrivals has historically contributed to economic growth, cultural dynamism, social diversification, and demographic shifts. Importantly, immigration has also played a central role in shaping electoral outcomes and public policy debates. As naturalized citizens form a larger segment of the electorate, their political preferences and voting behavior warrant deeper examination. Understanding how immigration has changed the U.S. electorate over time requires a closer look at theories of political assimilation and the evolving priorities of immigrant populations.

Traditional theories like the classical assimilation theory, most popularly attributed to Warner and Srole (1945), suggest that over time, immigrant groups assimilate into mainstream political culture, aligning their policy concerns with those of the general electorate. However, alternative perspectives contend that factors such as socioeconomic status, race, and education play a more critical role in shaping political preferences than whether an individual is a first-generation immigrant (born abroad), second-generation (U.S. born with at least one foreign-born parent), or third+ generation (Portes and Zhou 1993).

This paper examines issue priorities among first- and second-generation immigrants in the United States in comparison to the general electorate, testing competing claims from classical and segmented assimilation theories. The central research questions guiding this analysis is: *To what extent do first- and second-generation immigrants differ from the general electorate in their issue priorities? Are differences in issue prioritization better explained by generational status or by demographic characteristics such as race, education, and income?* By focusing on

key areas such as healthcare, the economy, national security, foreign policy, immigration, the environment, abortion, and education, the study sheds light on the unique priorities of these groups and how they compare to the general electorate. Furthermore, this research explores whether demographic factors exert a stronger influence on issue salience than generational status, offering insights into the complex interplay of cultural heritage, political socialization, and structural determinants in shaping immigrant political behavior.

Literature Review

Immigration and Demographic Shifts

Immigration accounts for over 80% of the recent population growth in the United States, making it the leading driver of demographic change (Frey 2024). Among the foreign-born population, approximately 53%, or 24.5 million individuals, are naturalized citizens, making up a significant proportion of the U.S. electorate (Marrow and Batalova 2024). These immigrant communities bring distinct perspectives informed by their cultural heritage and lived experiences, contributing to the diversification of political preferences within the electorate. As of 2022, naturalized citizens made up around 10% of all voters nationwide (Schaeffer 2024). With the federal government processing citizenship applications at the fastest pace in a decade in 2024, many newly naturalized citizens became eligible to vote in the 2024 elections, further reshaping the electorate and the growing political significance of immigrant communities (Bernal 2024; Jordan 2024). In key states, their influence is even more pronounced: they account for an estimated 21% of eligible voters in California, 14% in Nevada, and 9% in Arizona—figures that signal their potential to shape the outcome of elections (Schaeffer 2024).

The increase in naturalized citizens and their descendants has also led to greater racial and ethnic diversification of the electorate. A significant portion of immigrants originate from Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, contributing to the steady decline in the proportion of non-Hispanic white Americans in the population (Batalova 2025; Lillie-Blanton and Hudman 2001). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, non-Hispanic whites are projected to comprise less than 50% of the U.S. population by 2045, with much of this demographic change attributed to higher birth rates among communities of color and increases in immigration (Krogstad, Dunn, and Passel 2021). This shift will certainly have implications for politics, as the growing electoral influence of racially and ethnically diverse voters may lead to evolving policy priorities, shifts in party coalitions, and increased attention to different issues.

We also see some crucial differences between the naturalized citizen electorate compared to the U.S.-born electorate on a variety of demographic measures. First-generation immigrant voters are generally older, more likely to have a bachelor's degree, live in households with slightly higher incomes, and have lower levels of English proficiency (Schaeffer 2024). They also cluster in more urban areas and states with large immigrant populations like California, New Jersey, and New York, which influences their exposure to targeted political messaging and party outreach (Hahn and Medina 2024). In contrast, second-generation Americans have demographic characteristics that generally resemble those of the overall U.S. adult population, specifically in terms of educational attainment and socioeconomic status (Pew Research Center 2013). This convergence may reflect both assimilation into mainstream U.S. society and the changing composition of the electorate due to ongoing immigration. As second-generation Americans adapt to broader social, economic, and cultural influences due to their time spent in the United

States, their political attitudes may also diverge from that of their immigrant parents, reflecting shifting priorities and partisan affiliations over time.

The long-term political impact of immigration and demographic change will likely depend on the extent to which immigrant-origin populations are mobilized and engaged by political institutions. Historically, naturalized citizens have voted at lower rates than native-born citizens, due in part to language barriers, unfamiliarity with the political system, and lower outreach from political parties (Bass and Casper 2001; Wong et al. 2011). Politicians and campaigns have also been criticized for failing to adequately prioritize and engage with new immigrants, particularly by overlooking the distinct needs and experiences associated with their specific ethnic identities (Moore 2024). At the same time, recent efforts by grassroots organizations and advocacy groups have significantly increased civic engagement among immigrant voters, especially in battleground states. Through multilingual educational materials and voter registration initiatives, these efforts have encouraged greater political engagement among immigrant-origin voters (Cheang 2024; McDowell 2024). In particular, the 2024 elections highlighted issues that brought many new voters to the ballots for the first time, including immigration reform, reproductive rights, foreign policy, and economic insecurity (Chávez 2024; Wilson 2024). As immigrant-origin populations continue to grow, their political incorporation will likely become increasingly consequential to the future of American politics.

Theories of Assimilation and Political Behavior

Classical Assimilation Theory

Classical assimilation theory, also known as straight-line assimilation, posits that immigrants gradually adopt the cultural, social, and economic characteristics of the dominant group in a linear process (Gordon 1964; Park 1928; Warner and Srole 1945). According to this

perspective, first-generation immigrants are less likely to vote due to several barriers, including language difficulties, lack of familiarity with the political system, and weaker social networks (Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001; Terriquez and Kwon 2014). Many first-generation immigrants arrive with limited knowledge of the country's electoral process, and those who are not naturalized citizens are unable to vote at all. Even after gaining citizenship, participation may remain low if they do not feel politically connected to their new home. Thus, when first-generation immigrants do vote, they may still retain issue priorities influenced by their country of origin or migration experiences. For example, a study of first-generation Cuban Americans in South Florida indicated that their overwhelming preference for the Republican party is reflective of their anti-Castro views and their desire for policies that align with their anti-communist, hardline foreign policy beliefs (Girard, Grenier, and Gladwin 2012).

As immigrants settle and their children grow up in the host country, second-generation immigrants are expected to engage in politics at much higher rates (Lopez and Marcelo 2008). Having been socialized within the country's political and civic institutions, second-generations are more likely to register to vote, align with political parties, and participate in elections at rates similar to native-born citizens (Mollenkopf et al. 2012). Over time, the classical model predicts that differences in political participation between immigrants and non-immigrants will diminish, resulting in full political assimilation. If this holds true, we would then expect issue salience among second-generation immigrants to closely mirror that of native-born voters.

However, this theory has been widely criticized for oversimplifying the assimilation process and assuming a uniform trajectory across all immigrant groups. Critics argue that assimilation is neither linear nor inevitable, as structural barriers such as racial discrimination and political exclusion can slow or alter the process (Gans 1992; Rumbaut 1997; Villarreal and

Tamborini 2018). These critics contend that second-generation immigrants may also exhibit behaviors that deviate from the political attitudes of the majority; instead, their issue priorities are also shaped by factors such as socioeconomic mobility, ethnic identity, and continued engagement with their parents' political concerns. Moreover, scholars have documented the persistence and vitality of ethnic sub-communities that thrive across generations, often maintaining distinct social and political norms that resist full incorporation into the dominant Anglo-Saxon Protestant mainstream (Greeley 1971; Glazer and Moynihan 1970; Haller et al. 2011). This body of scholarship challenges the classical model's assumption that assimilation leads to the erosion of group-specific political behaviors. Rather than being absorbed into a uniform political culture, many second-generation Americans remain embedded in ethnic networks that continue to shape their civic outlook and policy preferences.

Segmented Assimilation Theory

In response to the limitations of classical assimilation theory, Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou introduced the segmented assimilation theory in 1993, offering a more nuanced framework for understanding the diverse experiences of immigrants and their children in the United States. The theory argues that immigrant groups integrate into different segments of American society rather than following a single trajectory. Portes and Zhou highlight three possible pathways that immigrants can assimilate:

1. Upward Assimilation: Immigrants integrate into the middle class, aided by education, economic stability, and strong social networks.
2. Downward Assimilation: Structural barriers lead some immigrants into poverty and marginalized communities, limiting upward mobility.

3. Selective Assimilation: Immigrants maintain cultural ties while achieving economic success, supported by strong ethnic communities.

Segmented assimilation theory emphasizes that individual outcomes by second-generation immigrants are shaped by a combination of human capital—such as education level, age at arrival, English proficiency, and the structural or institutional contexts that immigrants encounter in their host society (Portes and Zhou 1993; Alba and Nee 1997; Haller et al. 2011). These external factors include local labor markets, government policies, neighborhood characteristics, and the presence or absence of ethnic support networks.

Portes and Zhou also identify three major barriers to successful adaptation: racial discrimination, the bifurcation of the labor market (which divides jobs into high-skill/high-pay and low-skill/low-pay sectors), and the rise of alternative subcultures such as gangs, which may undermine educational and civic pathways. These obstacles can limit the extent to which second-generation youth engage with mainstream political systems and may foster a sense of disillusionment or a turn toward identity-based or issue-specific political activism.

In sum, segmented assimilation theory offers a more flexible and realistic lens for understanding the political behavior of second-generation Americans. It highlights how issue salience and participation vary not only between immigrant generations, but also within generational cohorts based on race, class, education, and local context. For instance, immigrants who follow an upward mobility trajectory may begin to mirror the issue priorities of the general electorate and adopt mainstream concerns, while those who experience downward or selective assimilation may prioritize group-specific issues. Recognizing this diversity is essential to capturing the complex ways in which immigrant communities engage with American democracy.

Political Behavior of Immigrants

While naturalized immigrants represent a growing and diverse segment of the U.S. population with the potential to influence political and social dynamics, their voter turnout continues to lag behind that of native-born citizens (Bass and Casper 2001). Scholars have noted that although naturalized citizens often participate differently in politics compared to the native-born, the broader implications of their political behavior remain underexplored.

Given the contrasting views of assimilation of immigrant populations in the United States, varying theories have also emerged regarding the political behavior of immigrants. One school of thought suggests that immigrants, regardless of how long they have lived in the United States, quickly adapt to the dominant political culture. According to this perspective, their policy preferences and voting behavior are mostly indistinguishable from Americans whose families have been here for generations (Wilson and Nowrasteh 2015). This perspective implies that political acculturation occurs rapidly, with immigrants adapting to the broader political landscape rather than maintaining distinct policy preferences.

However, other scholars emphasize a generational shift in political participation, often referred to as the “second-generation advantage.” This perspective argues that second-generation immigrants are more politically engaged than their first-generation counterparts, largely because they face fewer structural barriers such as limited English proficiency or unfamiliarity with the U.S. political system (Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001; Wong 2000). From this view, being raised in the dominant cultural climate in the United States facilitates greater assimilation into civic life and political institutions. As a result, second-generation immigrants may adopt political issue priorities that align more closely with the general electorate, whereas first-generation immigrants may retain issue salience shaped by their countries of origin or unique experiences as

newcomers. Yet, generational status alone may not be the strongest predictor of immigrant political behavior. Building on segmented assimilation theory, research increasingly suggests that political identity and behavior among immigrant populations are shaped by a complex interplay of identity, social position, and structural constraints rather than generational status alone, as immigrant groups differ both from the general population and one another (Cho 1999).

Racial Identity

Race continues to serve as one of the most influential factors in shaping political attitudes and issue salience among both immigrant and native-born populations. Scholars have long argued that racial identity mediates how immigrant communities perceive their place in American society, influencing political solidarity and trust in institutions (Sorrell et al. 2019). Racial identity may even be a more powerful predictor in shaping issue prioritization than generational status, shaping policy preferences that align more closely with an individual's ethnic group than with the broader electorate—particularly in contexts where structural racism and social exclusion persist across generations (Masouka and Junn 2013). This aligns with Dawson's (1994) linked fate theory, which contends that the perceptions of shared identities and group disadvantage lead racial minorities to adopt distinct collective political identities within their community.

Polling data supports this theoretical perspective. In the lead-up to the 2024 election, Black voters prioritized national security, immigration, and foreign affairs (Young n.d.), while AAPI voters emphasized inflation and immigration (AAPI Data/AP-NORC 2024), and Latino voters cited economic issues, healthcare, crime, and gun policy as top concerns (Lopez and Noe-Bustamante 2024). These distinct issue priorities reflect the salience of racialized experiences and identity-based concerns that are not easily explained by assimilation alone.

Income Level

Income level also plays a crucial role in shaping political behavior, particularly among immigrant communities where economic insecurity often intersects with legal status, employment sectors, and access to social safety nets. DeSipio (1997) notes that while naturalized citizens share similar predictors of political participation as native-born Americans—such as age and education—income stratification can lead to divergent policy preferences within immigrant populations.

According to recent research by Pew Research Center (2024), individuals at the lowest and highest ends of the income distribution tend to support Democratic policies, while middle-income earners are more likely to favor the Republicans. These trends hold true across immigrant and non-immigrant groups, suggesting that household income may exert a stronger influence than generational status. There is also a notable divide in partisanship based on occupational skill level, which may translate to income level: high-skilled immigrants are less likely to support the Republican Party, while lower-skilled immigrants are more likely to do so. These findings underscore the importance of considering economic segmentation within immigrant communities. Such divisions may translate into varying degrees of issue prioritization, especially with regards to economic policies like inflation.

Educational Attainment

Education is one of the most powerful predictors of political ideology and policy preferences in the United States, and its impact is particularly pronounced among immigrant communities. More educated individuals (those with Bachelor's degree and above in particular) are far more likely to support the Democratic Party, and likely therefore policies that the party

champions such as climate change, abortion, and healthcare (Hoekstra et al. 2024; Pew Research Center 2024)

For first- and second-generation immigrants, education serves as a key mechanism for civic engagement. Higher educational attainment enhances language proficiency, increases exposure to civic and political knowledge, and builds confidence in navigating complex political systems. This may foster greater political participation and alignment with mainstream political discourse, as immigrants with higher levels of education may more easily access and understand dominant narratives around policy issues.

Yet, this alignment with the dominant political culture may not be evidence of assimilation per se; rather, it reflects the stratifying power of educational institutions and the role of elite socialization in shaping political worldviews. In this context, political alignment may emerge not through generational acculturation but through institutional pathways that reward particular forms of cultural capital. Thus, education may simultaneously act as a vehicle for both integration and stratification, reinforcing patterns of political behavior that align with class-based interests more than immigrant origin or generational identity.

Hypothesis

Building on these perspectives, this paper examines the extent to which generational status or other demographic factors play a more significant role in shaping the political preferences of immigrants. This study is therefore asking the question: To what extent do first- and second-generation immigrants differ from the general electorate in their issue priorities, and are these differences better explained by generational status or by demographic characteristics

such as race, education, and income? To test these competing claims, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Generational Status and Political Priorities (Classical Assimilation)

H₁: The political issue priorities of second-generation immigrants will resemble those of first-generation immigrants more than those of the general electorate.

H₂: Second-generation immigrants will prioritize political issues in a manner more similar to the general electorate than first-generation immigrants

H₀: There is no significant difference in the political issue priorities of first-generation, second-generation immigrants, and non-immigrants.

Hypothesis 2: Demographic Factors and Political Priorities (Segmented Assimilation)

H₁: The issue priorities of immigrants will vary more based on race, income level, and education level than by generational status.

H₂: Political issue priorities vary primarily by generational status, with later generations aligning more with the general electorate.

H₀: Race, income level, and education level do not have a stronger influence on political preferences than generational status.

Methodology

Data

The study uses data from an original national survey of eligible voters in the 2024 election designed by the Media and American Elections graduate seminar and sponsored by the Civic Education Research Lab (CERL) at Georgetown University. Respondents were recruited via Prolific, an online platform for behavioral research which has been shown to produce high quality data based on respondents' comprehension of survey tasks, attention to questions, honesty in answering items, and reliability of results (Peer et al. 2021). Prolific was instructed to draw a representative sample of U.S. citizens who were eligible voters based on their party identification, age, gender, and racial and ethnic identities. The respondents received a monetary stipend for their participation. The survey consisted of 252 items and was in the field from November 14 to 19. Data were collected on a total of 1,882 respondents. The survey took an average of 18 minutes to complete.

The percentage of Republicans (34%), Democrats (33%), and Independents (33%) in the sample was nearly identical to the partisan breakdown of registered voters in the electorate identified by the Pew Research Center (2024). 48.6% of the sample cast their presidential ballot for Donald Trump, 48% for Kamala Harris, and 3.4% for another candidate, which is close to the recorded vote as of December 2024 (Reuters 2024). The gender, racial/ethnic, and age distribution of the sample resembled their representation in the electorate.

Among all respondents, 13% identified as the first generation in their family to settle in the United States, meaning they were born outside the U.S. and immigrated to the country themselves. A larger portion, 21.4%, identified as second generation, indicating they were born in the U.S. but had at least one parent who immigrated. The remaining 65.5% of respondents did

not fall into either of these categories, suggesting they belong to later generations of immigrants, which we will classify as the third+ generation.

Findings

Political Interest and Partisan Identity

Interest in the 2024 presidential election varies across immigrant generations, with first-generation respondents reporting slightly lower engagement levels than second-generation and other groups. Among first-generation respondents, 47.1% reported being extremely interested, compared to 51.8% of second-generation individuals and 58.0% of others. Political affiliation also differs, with first-generation immigrants having a slightly higher proportion of strong Republicans (21.5%) than second-generation (18.1%) and others (13.3%). Conversely, non-immigrants reported a slightly higher proportion of strong Democrats (18.9%) compared to both first- (14.9%) and second-generation immigrants (16.3%).

Key Issue Priorities

To examine differences in political issue priorities across immigrant generations, a cross-tabulation analysis was conducted to compare first-generation, second-generation, and third+ generation respondents. Respondents were asked whether each issue was considered their top priority, very important, somewhat important, or not important. For each issue, the percentage of respondents within each generational category who identified the issue as a top priority is reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Political Issue Priorities by Immigrant Generation

Issue Priority	First Generation (Top Priority %)	Second Generation (Top Priority %)	Third+ Generation (Top Priority %)	χ^2 (df)	p	Cramér's V
The Economy	44.2%	41.5%	34.4%	18.18(6)	.006*	.070
Inflation	41.9%	37.4%	30.3%	30.32(6)	<.001	.090
Education	39.3%	36.2%	28.9%	20.89(6)	.002	.075
Healthcare	38.8%	42.6%	29.5%	32.47(6)	<.001	.094
Support for Democracy	34.7%	36.7%	37.3%	4.21(6)	.648	.034
Environment	31.1%	28.6%	25.6%	12.40(6)	.054	.058
Immigration	29.9%	28.8%	23.4%	14.88(6)	.021	.063
National Security	27.1%	33.4%	22.1%	26.21(6)	<.001	.084
Abortion	26.3%	29.8%	29.4%	8.84(6)	.183	.049
Foreign Policy	22.1%	20.4%	13.7%	18.75(6)	.005	.071

Note. χ^2 = Pearson chi-square statistic. Cramér's V reports effect size.

The analysis shows statistically significant differences in multiple areas, with p-values below 0.05 or approaching statistical significance. The results indicate significant variation in priorities across generational groups, with second-generation immigrants demonstrating both continuity with first-generation immigrants and gradual assimilation to broader electorate trends.

Economic Concerns and Inflation

Economic issues ranked among the highest priorities for all groups, though first-generation immigrants exhibited the strongest concern (44.2%), followed closely by second-generation immigrants (41.5%) and third+ generation individuals (34.4%). Similarly, inflation

was more frequently cited as a primary issue among first-generation immigrants (41.9%) compared to second-generation immigrants (37.4%) and third+ generation individuals (30.3%). These findings suggest that first-generation immigrants, who may experience greater financial precarity and barriers to economic mobility, place heightened importance on financial stability. Many individuals migrate due to economic reasons, making financial stability a central concern. While second-generation immigrants also prioritize economic concerns, their issue emphasis trends more closely toward the general electorate.

Healthcare and Education

Healthcare emerged as a particularly salient issue for second-generation immigrants, with 42.6% citing it as a top priority compared to 38.8% of first-generation immigrants and only 29.5% of third+ generation individuals. This result may be attributed to the second generation's dual role in accessing healthcare for both themselves and their aging first-generation parents, while also navigating the U.S. healthcare system with greater familiarity than their predecessors.

Education followed a more linear trend, although first-generation (39.3%) and second-generation (36.2%) individuals ranked it at a higher priority compared to third+ generation respondents (28.9%). The emphasis on education among immigrants aligns with classical assimilation theory, where immigrant families prioritize education as a key mechanism for upward mobility and integration into mainstream society (Kihara 2023).

Immigration and Foreign Policy

Unsurprisingly, immigration remained a prominent issue among first-generation (29.2%) and second-generation (28.8%) respondents compared to third+ generation individuals (23.4%). First-generation and second-generation immigrants may view immigration as personally consequential, as it directly affects their and their families' legal status and economic

opportunities. However, the relatively closer percentages between first and second-generation immigrants suggests sustained salience across generations rather than immediate assimilation into broader electorate concerns.

First-generation immigrants (22.1%) and second-generation immigrants (20.4%) also prioritize foreign policy at significantly higher rates than third+ generation immigrants (13.8%). This finding aligns with previous research indicating that immigrants tend to maintain strong transnational ties and remain engaged with global affairs affecting their country of origin (Levitt 2004). The relatively close percentages between first- and second-generation immigrants also again signify a sustained concern for international affairs across generations, rather than a rapid convergence with the general electorate's priorities.

National Security and Democracy

Interestingly, second-generation immigrants expressed stronger concern about national security (33.4%) than both first-generation (27.1%) and third+ generation individuals (22.1%). This finding may reflect the second generation's increased exposure to national political discourse and security concerns, while still maintaining salient ties to immigrant-origin perspectives that may heighten sensitivity to geopolitical instability and perceived threats.

Conversely, support for democracy showed no statistically significant variation across generational groups, with 34.7% of first-generation immigrants saying it's their top priority compared to 36.7% second-generation immigrants and 37.3% third+ generation immigrants. This may suggest a broadly shared commitment to democratic principles across generations, though further research is needed to confirm this pattern. This consistency may also reflect the integration of democratic norms through shared institutions such as schools and media.

Social Issues: Abortion and the Environment

Generational differences in prioritizing abortion rights were not statistically significant, indicating that attitudes on this issue are likely shaped more by ideological and partisan alignment than by generational status. Similarly, while concern for environmental issues was slightly higher among first-generation (31.1%) and second-generation (28.6%) respondents than third+ generation individuals (25.6%), this difference did not reach statistical significance.

Demographic Factors and Influence

Multiple ordinary least squares regression (OLS) models were estimated to further examine predictors of issue prioritization across various policy domains, focusing on immigrant generational status, income level, education level, and racial identity, with White, third+ generation respondents being held as the reference group. For each model, the dependent variable measured the number of respondents who identified a given issue as a top political priority. Generational status was coded into three categories: first-generation immigrants, second-generation immigrants, and third-generation-or-higher respondents. Two dummy variables were created representing first-generation and second-generation respondents. Race and ethnicity were similarly dummy coded. White respondents served as the reference category, while separate binary variables were created for Black respondents, Hispanic or Latino respondents, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) respondents, and respondents identifying with another racial category. Education and income were included as continuous variables, with higher values indicating greater levels of educational attainment and household income. Standardized beta coefficients are reported in Table 2 to facilitate comparisons across predictors.

Table 2. Multiple Regression Analysis of Political Issue Priorities

	The Economy	Inflation	Education	Healthcare	Support for Democracy	Environment	Immigration	National Security	Abortion	Foreign Policy
First Generation	.077**	.102***	.010	.040	-.019	.044	.067**	.061*	-.007	.033
Second Generation	.063**	.104***	.013	.094***	-.015	.038	.082***	.092***	.001	.051*
Education	-.067**	-.110***	.082***	.063*	.102***	.112***	-.072**	-.043	.090***	.077**
Income	.084***	.031	.009	-.038	-.019	-.014	.066**	.135***	-.042	.068**
AAPI	-.065**	-.069**	-.002	-.053*	.023	-.010	-.044	-.083***	.080**	-.050**
Black	.087***	.052*	.150***	.149***	-.015	.142***	.003	.052*	.035	.021
Hispanic or Latino	.011	-.046	.049*	.017	.009	.018	-.030	-.032	.015	.010
Other Race	.019	-.037	.000	.017	-.013	.057*	-.001	-.078***	-.006	.049
Adjusted R ²	.024***	.029***	.030***	.040***	.006*	.036***	.011***	.037***	.010***	.018***
n	1853	1850	1850	1842	1851	1842	1845	1847	1847	1842

Note. Standardized β coefficients reported in the table.

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Economic Concerns and Inflation

First-generation and second-generation immigrant status were significant positive predictors of economic salience, relative to third+ generation Americans, suggesting that immigrant-origin respondents were slightly more likely to prioritize the economy. Among the socioeconomic variables, household income emerged as the strongest predictor, and was positively correlated with prioritizing the economy, while educational attainment had a negative, albeit small, association. Racial identity also emerged as a significant predictor. Black respondents were more likely to prioritize the economy compared to white respondents, whereas AAPI respondents were less likely to do so. Latino or Hispanic and Other respondents did not show a statistically significant effect.

Generational status was again a significant predictor for prioritizing inflation, with both first-generation and second-generation respondents more likely to prioritize inflation than their third+ generation counterparts. Among socioeconomic variables, household income was not significantly associated with inflation prioritization, whereas education level had a stronger negative correlation than generational status, suggesting that individuals with higher educational attainment prioritize inflation less. Racial identity also played a role in predicting inflation salience. Black respondents were more likely to prioritize inflation compared to white respondents, while AAPI respondents were less likely to prioritize it. The relationship between Latino or Hispanic respondents and inflation as an issue priority approached statistical significance but did not reach it, and respondents identifying with other ethnicities were not statistically significant.

Healthcare and Education

Despite reaching statistical significance in the cross-tabulation analysis, generational status did not significantly predict education issue salience, with both first-generation and second-generation immigrants not differing significantly from third+ generation individuals. However, race was a significant predictor for Black respondents and Hispanic or Latino respondents, both of whom were more likely to prioritize education as an issue. In terms of socioeconomic factors, education level was a significant predictor, with individuals possessing higher levels of education more likely to prioritize education as an issue. However, household income was not a statistically significant predictor, suggesting that prioritization of education as a political issue does not vary meaningfully across income levels.

Interestingly, generational status was not significantly associated with healthcare prioritization for first-generation respondents, suggesting that immigrant generational status is not the most salient predictor in this domain. However, second-generation status was a significant predictor, indicating that second-generation individuals are more likely to prioritize healthcare relative to third+ generation individuals. We see similar trends regarding the relationship between demographic factors and healthcare issue prioritization. Race also played a significant role, with Black respondents most likely to prioritize healthcare, while AAPI respondents were least likely to do so. Education level was a significant positive predictor, indicating that individuals with higher educational attainment are more likely to prioritize healthcare, while household income did not significantly predict healthcare issue salience.

Immigration and Foreign Policy

Both first-generation and second-generation immigrant status were significant positive predictors of prioritizing immigration, compared to third+ generation Americans, the reference

group. Household income also emerged as a significant predictor, with higher-income individuals more likely to prioritize immigration. Conversely, individuals with higher levels of education were less likely to prioritize immigration. Race was not a statistically significant predictor, as none of the racial categories demonstrated significant associations with prioritization of immigration as an issue.

First-generation status was not significantly associated with foreign policy prioritization. However, second-generation status was a statistically significant predictor, with second-generation individuals more likely to prioritize foreign policy compared to third+ generation individuals. Race was a significant predictor for AAPI and Other racial groups, with AAPI individuals being the least likely to prioritize foreign policy, while individuals from other racial categories were more likely to prioritize foreign policy. The correlation between foreign policy with Black and Hispanic/Latino respondents did not meet statistical significance. Both individuals that have higher educational levels and higher household income were positively associated with prioritizing foreign policy.

National Security and Democracy

First-generation and second-generation immigrant status were both significant positive predictors of prioritizing national security, relative to third+ generation Americans. Race also played a role, with Black respondents being the most likely to prioritize national security, while AAPI and other racial groups were less likely to do so. Household income was a statistically significant predictor, with higher-income individuals more likely to prioritize national security. However, educational attainment approached, but did not reach, statistical significance, with individuals possessing higher education levels being less likely to prioritize national security

Generational status did not emerge as a significant predictor for support for democracy, as both first-generation and second-generation respondents did not differ significantly from third+ generation individuals. Notably, the only significant predictor was education level, where individuals with higher levels of education were more likely to prioritize support for democracy.

Social Issues: Abortion and the Environment

First-generation and second-generation status were not statistically significant predictors of prioritizing abortion. Race was a significant predictor for AAPI individuals, who were more likely to prioritize abortion, but Black, Hispanic/Latino, and other racial groups did not show significant differences. Higher educational attainment was positively associated with prioritizing abortion as an issue. However, household income did not reach full statistical significance, with individuals from higher-income households being less likely to prioritize abortion.

Generational status approached significance for first-generation respondents but did not reach it for second-generation respondents. Race was a significant predictor, with Black respondents and those identifying as other ethnicities more likely to prioritize environmental issues. Education level was also a significant predictor, with those with higher levels of education more likely to prioritize the environment. Household income was not a significant predictor.

Discussion

Hypothesis 1: Generational Status and Political Priorities

The results provide mixed support for the competing hypotheses regarding the political issue priorities of first-generation, second-generation, and third+ generation individuals.

The null hypothesis (H_0), which posits no significant difference in political issue priorities across generational groups, is largely rejected. Statistically significant differences emerged in multiple issue areas, including economic concerns, healthcare, education, immigration, and foreign policy, indicating that generational status plays a role in shaping political priorities. However, differences are nonsignificant for two issues in particular—support for democracy and abortion.

The first hypothesis (H_1) suggests that second-generation immigrants' issue priorities would more closely resemble those of first-generation immigrants than those of the general electorate. The data partially support this claim, where second-generation immigrants exhibited similar or approaching levels of prioritization of certain issues as first-generation immigrants. The partial support for H_1 is consistent with segmented assimilation theory. The similarities between first- and second-generation immigrants on issues like immigration, education, and foreign policy—areas often directly tied to migration narratives and intergenerational mobility—underscore this pattern of selective retention and ethnic continuity.

Conversely, the second alternative hypothesis (H_2), which argues that second-generation immigrants would prioritize political issues more similarly to the general electorate than first-generation immigrants, also finds some support. On issues such as national security and economic concerns, second-generation immigrants demonstrated a shift toward alignment with third+ generation individuals. These are issues that are generally more embedded within mainstream U.S. political discourse and media framing, which may make them more susceptible to convergence across generational groups (Brenan 2024; McCombs and Shaw 1972). Second-generation immigrants, having been raised and educated in the United States, are more likely to internalize dominant national narratives about security threats and economic stability, leading to

partial alignment with third+ generation respondents. This suggests elements of classical assimilation theory, which posits a more linear and uniform integration into mainstream society over generations. The gradual convergence on certain issue priorities among second- and third+ generation individuals reflects this traditional pathway of political incorporation, where immigrant-origin populations increasingly adopt the issue agendas of the broader electorate.

Overall, the findings indicate that second-generation immigrants occupy a middle ground between continuity with first-generation concerns and gradual integration into the general electorate's issue priorities. This nuanced pattern suggests that political assimilation is neither immediate nor uniform across all policy areas, highlighting the complexities of generational political socialization.

Hypothesis 2: Demographic Factors and Political Priorities

The second hypothesis, which posits that immigrants' issue priorities will vary based on socioeconomic status, race, and education level more than generational status (H_1), is largely supported by the findings, further supporting the framework of segmented assimilation. Demographic factors, particularly racial identity and socioeconomic status, were found to be significant predictors of political issue prioritization, often more so than generational status. For instance, racial identity played a significant role in predicting priorities related to healthcare, national security, and education, suggesting that race is a more salient factor in shaping political preferences than generational status alone for some issues. Socioeconomic status also emerged as a key predictor, with higher household income being positively correlated with prioritizing economic and foreign policy issues. Additionally, educational attainment was a significant factor influencing prioritization of certain issues, such as healthcare, education, and foreign policy.

Interestingly, higher levels of education were negatively associated with prioritizing issues like inflation, suggesting that those with more education may be more inclined to view these issues through a different lens or to place emphasis on issues perceived as more pressing.

The significant variation in issue prioritization by race and socioeconomic status suggests that segmented assimilation offers a more nuanced, and accurate, explanation for immigrant political behavior than classical assimilation. These findings emphasize the importance of considering multiple demographic factors when examining the political preferences of immigrant populations. The second hypothesis (H_2), which posited that generational status would be the primary determinant of political issue priorities, was thus not supported by these findings. While generational status seemed to play a role in shaping some political preferences, the statistically significant relationships between factors like race, income, and education consistently across different issue priorities challenge the assumption that later generations of immigrants automatically align with the general electorate. Instead, this points to a more nuanced, multifaceted approach to understanding political behavior within immigrant communities, and the need to move away from treating immigrant communities as monolithic political groups.

Limitations and Further Research

While this study provides valuable insights, it is important to recognize several limitations. One such limitation is the lack of consideration of intersectionality, which highlights how various demographic factors—such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status interact to shape individuals' preferences. Intersectionality is a theoretical framework based on the idea that human experiences are shaped by multiple social identities simultaneously and cannot be understood by examining these identities in isolation (Crenshaw 1991). Future research could

benefit from an intersectional lens to provide a more nuanced understanding of how social identities and demographic factors compound or mitigate certain political preferences across diverse immigrant populations.

The survey sample, while large and representative, may not fully capture the diversity of immigrant experiences across different regions or subgroups. Future research could explore how political issue priorities differ within immigrant subgroups, such as different ethnic or national origin groups. Additionally, the study focuses on U.S. citizens who are eligible to vote in the 2024 elections, and further research could examine the political priorities of non-citizens, who may have different concerns especially regarding immigration policies.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that both generational status and demographic factors may play a meaningful yet distinct role in shaping the political issue priorities of immigrants. These patterns suggest that while generational change contributes to gradual assimilation, it does not erase the unique experiences and perspectives that immigrants bring to the political landscape. However, the results also underscore the relevance of segmented assimilation theory. Multiple regression models show that race, education, and income levels often have equal or greater predictive power than generational status, especially in domains like education and healthcare. These results point to the layered and intersecting influences of demographic identity and socioeconomic status, emphasizing that immigrant political behavior cannot be understood through generational status alone.

This research highlights the importance of tailoring political messaging and policy outreach to reflect the distinct priorities of immigrant communities across generations and

demographic groups. Campaigns aiming to mobilize immigrant voters—particularly second- and third-generation Americans—should not assume uniform assimilation into mainstream political concerns. Instead, they should recognize the enduring salience of issues like immigration, healthcare, and education among these groups. For instance, younger and U.S.-born children of immigrants may still prioritize immigration and healthcare reform, not necessarily because of personal experiences, but due to familial and community ties. Campaigns that center these issues in culturally relevant ways stand to build deeper trust and engagement.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that a one-size-fits-all approach to governance risks overlooking the layered needs of immigrant populations. Policymakers should consider how economic insecurity, access to healthcare, and educational opportunity are experienced differently by racial and generational subgroups within the immigrant electorate. Investing in disaggregated data collection and community-based consultation can help develop more equitable policies that reflect these nuanced realities. Ultimately, recognizing the diverse pathways of immigrant political development can inform more inclusive democratic participation and policy responsiveness.

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