

New York Times

A Generation Gap Over Immigration

By Damien Cave

May 18, 2010

Meaghan Patrick, a junior at New College of Florida, a tiny liberal arts college in Sarasota, says discussing immigration with her older relatives is like “hitting your head against a brick wall.”

Cathleen McCarthy, a senior at the University of Arizona, says immigration is the rare, radioactive topic that sparks arguments with her liberal mother and her grandmother.

“Many older Americans feel threatened by the change that immigration presents,” Ms. McCarthy said. “Young people today have simply been exposed to a more accepting worldview.”

Forget sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll; immigration is a new generational fault line.

In the wake of the new Arizona law allowing the police to detain people they suspect of entering the country illegally, young people are largely displaying vehement opposition — leading protests on Monday at Senator John McCain’s offices in Tucson, and at the game here between the Florida Marlins and the Arizona Diamondbacks.

Meanwhile, baby boomers, despite a youth of “live and let live,” are siding with older Americans and supporting the Arizona law.

This emerging divide has appeared in a handful of surveys taken since the measure was signed into law, including a New York Times/CBS News poll this month that found that Americans 45 and older were more likely than the young to say the Arizona law was “about right” (as opposed to “going too far” or “not far enough”). Boomers were also more likely to say that “no newcomers” should be allowed to enter the country while more young people favored a “welcome all” approach.

The generational conflict could complicate chances of a federal immigration overhaul any time soon. “The hardening of this divide spells further stalemate,” said Roberto Suro, the former head of the nonpartisan Pew Hispanic Center.

And the causes are partly linked to experience. Demographically, younger and older Americans grew up in vastly different worlds. Those born after the civil rights era lived in a country of high rates of legal and illegal immigration. In their neighborhoods and schools, the presence of immigrants was as hard to miss as a Starbucks today.

In contrast, baby boomers and older Americans — even those who fought for integration — came of age in one of the most homogenous moments in the country’s history.

Immigration, which census figures show declined sharply from the Depression through the 1960s, reached a historic low point the year after Woodstock. From 1860 through 1920, 13 percent to 15 percent of the country was foreign born — a rate similar to today's, when immigrants make up about 12.5 percent of the country.

But in 1970, only 4.7 percent of the country was foreign born, and most of those immigrants were older Europeans, often unnoticed by the boomer generation born from 1946 to 1964.

Boomers and their parents also spent their formative years away from the cities, where newer immigrants tended to gather — unlike today's young people who have become more involved with immigrants, through college, or by moving to urban areas.

“It's hard for them to share each others' views on what's going on,” said William H. Frey, a demographer with the Brookings Institution. “These older people grew up in largely white suburbs or largely segregated neighborhoods. Young people have grown up in an interracial culture.”

The generation gap is especially pronounced in formerly fast-growing states like Arizona and Florida, where retirees and new immigrants have flocked — one group for sun, the other for work.

In a new report based on census figures titled “The State of Metropolitan America,” Mr. Frey found that Arizona has the largest “cultural generation gap,” as he calls it, between older Americans who are largely white (83 percent in Arizona's case) and children under 18 who are increasingly members of minorities (57 percent in Arizona's case).

Florida ranks sixth on Mr. Frey's cultural generation gap list, with a 29 percentage point difference between the percentage of white people among its older residents and the percentage that whites make up of its children.

That very different makeup of the young and the old can lead to tensions. Demographers say it has the potential to produce public policy that alienates the young because older people are more likely to vote and less likely to be connected to the perspectives of youth — especially the perspectives of young people of different races and national origins.

“Short term, politically, the age divide heightens polarization,” Mr. Suro said “Long term,” he added, “there's the challenge of whether older citizens will pay for the education of the children of immigrants.”

Some older Americans acknowledge that how they grew up has shaped their opinions. Mike Lombardi, 56, of Litchfield, Ariz. — one of 1,079 respondents in the Times/CBS poll conducted from April 28 to May 2 — said his support for his state's new law stemmed partly from the shock of seeing gaggles of immigrants outside Home Depot, who he assumed were illegal. Comparing the situation to his youth in Torrance, Calif., in a follow-up interview, he said, “You didn't see anything like what you see now.”

Maggie Aspillaga, 62, a Cuban immigrant in Miami, had more specific concerns: a risk of crime from illegal immigrants and the costs in health care and other services. “They’re taking resources,” she said.

Some young people agree, of course, just as many baby boomers support more open immigration policies. In the poll, a majority of Americans in all age groups described illegal immigration as a “very serious” problem.

Still, divisions were pronounced by age: for instance, while 41 percent of Americans ages 45 to 64 and 36 percent of older Americans said immigration levels should be decreased, only 24 percent of those younger than 45 said so.

Ms. Patrick, 22, said the gap reflected what each group saw as normal. In her view, current immigration levels — legal and illegal — represent “the natural course of history.”

As children, after all, her generation watched “Sesame Street” with Hispanic characters, many of them sat in classrooms that were a virtual United Nations, and now they marry across ethnic lines in record numbers. Their children are even adopting mixed monikers like “Mexipino,” (Mexican and Filipino) and “Blaxican” (black and Mexican).

That “multiculti” (short for multicultural) United States is not without challenges. Aparna Malladi, 31, a graduate student at Florida International University originally from India, said that when she first entered laboratories in Miami, it took a while for her to learn the customs.

“I didn’t know that when I enter a room, I have to greet everyone and say goodbye when I leave,” Ms. Malladi said. “People thought I was being rude.”

Still, in interviews across the nation, young people emphasized the benefits of immigrants. Andrea Bonvecchio, 17, the daughter of a naturalized citizen from Venezuela, said going to a high school that is “like 98 percent Hispanic” meant she could find friends who enjoyed both Latin music and her favorite movie, “The Parent Trap.”

Nicole Vespia, 18, of Selden, N.Y., said older people who were worried about immigrants stealing jobs were giving up on an American ideal: capitalist meritocracy.

“If someone works better than I do, they deserve to get the job,” Ms. Vespia said. “I work in a stockroom, and my best workers are people who don’t really speak English. It’s cool to get to know them.”

Her parents’ generation, she added, just needs to adapt.

“My stepdad says, ‘Why do I have to press 1 for English?’ I think that’s ridiculous,” Ms. Vespia said, referring to the common instruction on customer-service lines. “It’s not that big of a deal. Quit crying about it. Press the button.”