

Whites Surprisingly Chill About Becoming Minority

108 May 19, 2015 10:27 AM EDT

By [Francis Wilkinson](#)

The U.S. is in the midst of a demographic transition unlike any in history. No nation with a white European ethnic majority has evolved to become a nonwhite-majority nation, a shift the U.S. is on track to achieve by mid-century. Certainly no nation has done so after half a millennium in which white Europeans and their American kin colonized much of the (nonwhite) world, and dominated global economics and warfare.

This is the context in which current U.S. debates over immigration take place. Given the enormity of the change, opposition to immigration among white Americans is shocking only for its lack of breadth and urgency.

We have been here before -- almost. "The projected shift to a 'majority minority' nation with respect to the white race as it's classified now in the U.S. has a parallel with an earlier shift," noted William Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institution, via e-mail. The official response in that case was significantly more vehement.

In the early 20th century, Congress, backed by the "science" of eugenics, restricted immigration by the "races" of southern and eastern Europe, which were generally viewed as inferior stock. Madison Grant's 1916 book, "The Passing of the Great Race," argued for Nordic supremacy to maintain the nation's stature. A 1917 law created the Asiatic Barred Zone to further curtail already limited immigration from most of Asia and the Middle East. And in 1921 and 1924 new immigration restrictions were imposed to privilege admission to the U.S. of immigrants from Germany, Ireland and the U.K. and to reduce the flow of most others.

Current resistance to nonwhite immigration -- including opposition to the legalization of undocumented immigrants who are already here -- is weak by comparison. According to a December Pew Research Center/USA Today survey, 70 percent of Americans supported legal status for undocumented immigrants living in the U.S., with 43 percent also supporting a path to citizenship. Specifically among whites, 64 percent said undocumented immigrants should be allowed to stay in the U.S. legally if certain requirements are met.

White fears of being overrun aren't entirely dead, and evidence of white backlash isn't hard to come by. In a 2013 poll by Latino Decisions, 61 percent of white conservatives and 56 percent of whites 65 or older agreed that growing racial diversity would fuel discrimination against whites. Conservative efforts to clamp down on voting rights and even birthright citizenship have a distinctly racial cast. Likewise, the racism that has percolated throughout the presidency of

Barack Obama -- himself a symbol of the nation's demographic future -- suggests that many Americans are resistant to change.

But given how momentous the transition is, it's remarkable that white backlash isn't broader and more intense. "It really is a puzzle," said Deborah Schildkraut, a political scientist at Tufts University and the author of "Americanism in the Twenty-First Century: Public Opinion in the Age of Immigration."

It's "very normal" for an ethnic group to fear the loss of dominance in a changing society, Schildkraut said. Yet white support for legalizing the roughly 11 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. is "at or near majority support," she added. "I'm honestly not sure what to attribute it to."

Schildkraut cited a few theories, including increasing acceptance of the notion that American identity has been decoupled from racial ancestry. That could be one reason that the overt white nationalism of European right-wing parties has struggled to gain stronger purchase in the U.S. Instead, Republican immigration restrictionists appear likely to be eclipsed by those who view political support from Hispanics (and Asians) as the only viable route to the party's national success. On the Democratic side, restrictionists already have been routed. When Hillary Clinton recently announced her solidarity with undocumented immigrants, promising to surpass Obama in the aggressive use of executive action in their behalf, there was no rebuttal from Democrats and the mainstream Republican response was strikingly muted.

Given the nation's peculiarly brutal racial history, the relative quiet is a great achievement. As the U.S. moves rapidly toward a white minority (unless, like Italians before them, Hispanics generally come to identify as "white"), American culture and politics will change accordingly. Yet beneath the surface agitation, powerful sectors of U.S. society -- including much of the federal government, big business, education, the military -- are moving not to block the transition, but to ease it. Conflict, racist and otherwise, will continue to arise; it inevitably does. But for a nation that only half a century before produced bloodshed as whites sought to block a small black minority from accessing democratic power, it's so far, so good.

To contact the author on this story:
Frank Wilkinson at fwilkinson1@bloomberg.net

To contact the editor on this story:
Zara Kessler at zkessler@bloomberg.net