



Immigration

October 10, 2024

Utah voters consider immigration of medium importance, but the 2024 Utah Priorities Project showed large differences among demographic groups. For instance, men are four percentage points more likely than women to prioritize the issue. Republicans are two percentage points more likely than unaffiliated voters and three percentage points more likely than Democrats. Conservatives are six percentage points more likely than moderates and eight percentage points more likely than liberals to prioritize the issue. Homeowners are two percentage points more likely than renters.

Current Immigration Demographics

As of 2023, about 8.9% of Utah’s population was born in a foreign country – or nearly 304,000 individuals.¹ About 42% of these people are naturalized citizens.² Of those that are not citizens, over half are estimated to be unauthorized immigrants.³ Over three-in-five foreign-born Utahns are from Latin American countries, and about one-in-five are from Asia.⁴ Many of Utah’s immigrants originate from Mexico (39%), with others coming from India, Canada, El Salvador, China, Peru, and many other locations (with listed countries at 3% each).⁵

Utahns generally feel like immigration is a part of America’s identity. Two-thirds of voters said that the phrase “America’s openness to people from all over the world is essential to who we are as a nation” was closer to their views than the phrase “If America is too open to people from all over the world, we risk losing our identity as a nation.” Liberals and moderates were likely to agree with the former phrase, while conservative voters were more likely to think openness risks losing the nation’s identity. (See Figure 1.) This breakdown closely tracked with Democrats and Republicans.

Past Utah Priorities Project research highlighted how Utahns differentiated between legal and illegal immigration. Responses showed that Utahns had much more positive feelings toward legal immigration.⁶

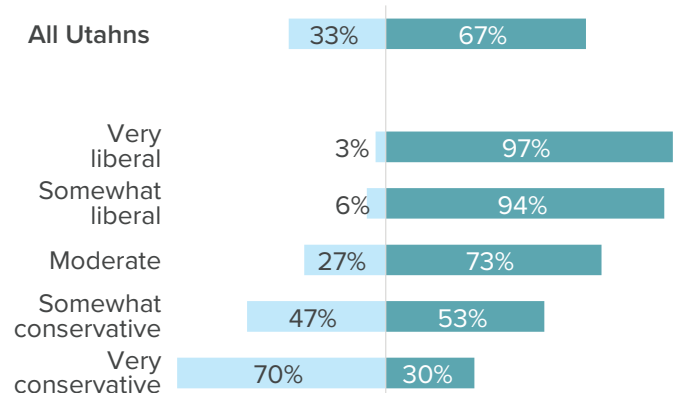
State Legislation and Policies

Utah policy toward immigrants has fluctuated over time, from somewhat accommodating to somewhat hostile.⁷ However, some recent Utah programs seem welcoming to immigrants. For instance, Utah has implemented legislation that helps immigrants residing in

the state illegally avoid deportation, especially those attending local universities.⁸ Utah has expanded in-state tuition for refugees and asylum-seekers and has been a leader in occupational licensing reform for immigrants.⁹ Eligible unauthorized residents, including Differed Action for Childhood Arrivals recipients, can access in-state tuition, state financial aid, driver’s licenses, and state identification.¹⁰ In April 2023, a new law called Reciprocal Professional Licensing opened the door for immigrants with professional training and licensing from other countries to get licensed in Utah.¹¹

Utahns – particularly moderates and liberals – think immigration is part of America’s identity.

Figure 1: Whether Immigration is a Part of America’s Identity or Threatens It



If America is too open to people from all over the world, we risk losing our identity as a nation.
America’s openness to people from all over the world is essential to who we are as a nation.

Source: Utah Foundation survey.

Economic Contributions

While immigrants make up about 9% of Utah's population, they play an outsized role in some parts of the state's workforce and economy.¹² For instance, they are more likely to be in the labor force.¹³ Within the labor force, they comprise 11% of all workers, accounting for 8% of entrepreneurs, 10% of STEM professionals, 13% of physicians, and 19% of manufacturing workers.¹⁴

Social and Cultural Impact

The social and cultural impact of immigrants in Utah is noteworthy. Immigrants bring diverse cultures, languages, and traditions, enriching the state's cultural landscape. Culinary diversity and cultural events reflect the rich tapestry of immigrant contributions. However, integration and adaptation can pose challenges. Language barriers, differing educational backgrounds, and cultural differences can sometimes lead to misunderstandings and social tensions.¹⁵

Educational institutions in Utah are working to address these issues by offering English as a Second Language programs and multicultural education initiatives. Immigrants also contribute to the social fabric by participating in community organizations, religious institutions, and local governments. Their involvement helps foster a sense of belonging and mutual respect among cultural groups.¹⁶

Challenges and Opportunities

Utah's immigrants face significant challenges. One challenge is the need for comprehensive immigration reform at the national level, which affects local policies and the lives of immigrants in Utah. Issues such as legal status, access to education, and healthcare remain critical areas needing attention.

Language barriers can impede access to education and employment opportunities. Cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings and social isolation. Additionally, unauthorized immigrants live under the constant threat of deportation, which can create a climate of fear and uncertainty.¹⁷ Further, despite immigrant-support policies, some Utahns may encounter bureaucratic hurdles and discrimination, hindering their full participation in society.¹⁸

Nonetheless, organizations such as the International Rescue Committee and the Utah Refugee Connection provide essential services that help immigrants and refugees integrate into society. These services include language classes, job training, and legal assistance.¹⁹

In addition, the state's relatively low unemployment rate and growing economy can benefit from immigrants' skills and talents. Policies aimed at better integration of immigrants, such as language acquisition programs, professional certification recognition, and community support initiatives, can enhance the positive impact of immigration.²⁰

Future Outlook

Looking ahead, the future of immigration in Utah will likely be shaped by broader national trends and policies. In the meantime, the state's economy, educational system, and social services must adapt to the continuing influx of immigrants. The continued success of immigration in Utah will depend on effective policies, community support, and a commitment to fostering an inclusive and welcoming environment for all residents.

Since 1945, leaders, legislators, and community members have relied upon the illuminating, independent, and nonpartisan public-policy research produced by the Utah Foundation to support informed decision-making on topics that matter most. As a 501(c)3 with broad community support and a 60-member board, the Utah Foundation exists to empower civic engagement as the foundation for enhanced quality of life for Utahns.

This research brief was written by Research Intern Melissa Nieto with assistance from other Utah Foundation staff.

Endnotes

1. US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, tables S0201 and DP05.
2. US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, tables S0201. And American Immigration Council. "New Americans in Utah," January 2023, https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research/new_americans_in_utah.pdf.
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20. Ibid.

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