

Major Social Issues in the Early 21st Century

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Historians will have to wait several decades before they can draw conclusions about the early 21st century. The nation and its diverse population grapple with economic and foreign policy issues, including homeland security, and with important social issues. This tutorial examines three questions that confronted Americans in the early 21st century.

1. Who Is an American?

Controversy regarding immigration is not new in the United States. Neither are calls to restrict immigration. So, what distinguishes the debates over immigration and the American identity during the early 21st century?

At the beginning of the 21st century, many Americans realized that an important demographic change was underway in the nation. The number of Americans of color, as well as the number of multiethnic Americans, was growing. The percentage of the U.S. population formed by people of non-European ancestry was also increasing.



This map indicates the top ethnicity (i.e., the ethnicity of the highest percentage of residents) in different parts of the country in 2000. Note the large percentage of Mexican Americans (pink) in the Southwestern United States, including the border region. African Americans (dark purple) were concentrated in the South. States including Arizona, New Mexico, and Oklahoma had large Native American (orange) populations. Americans of German (light blue) descent and other Americans of European descent inhabited significant areas throughout the nation.

The United States continued to experience increased immigration from Asia and Latin America during the early 21st century. Asians comprised approximately 25% of all immigrants who arrived in the country between 1990 and 2000. In 2010, Latinos were the largest minority group in the United States.

Immigrants from Asia and Latin America came from a variety of countries and backgrounds. Those who were financially secure at the time of their arrival in the United States sought occupational or educational advancement. Others were refugees who fled political oppression or war.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Beginning in October 2013, approximately 52,000 children, some of them unaccompanied by an adult, attempted to enter the U.S. by crossing the Mexico–United States border. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that 58% of these migrants, most of whom came from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, had fled their countries to escape poverty, violence, and exploitation.

Continued immigration, population growth, and the nation’s increasing diversity raise important issues for the United States:

1. *Increasing diversity has redefined race relations in the United States:* As a result of slavery and Jim Crow segregation, race relations in the United States used to be defined in biracial terms (i.e., Black and White). The increasing presence of Latinos, Asian Americans, and other ethnic groups in the late 20th and early

21st centuries has resulted in a redefinition of race relations based on multiracialism and multiculturalism.

2. *Demographic trends indicate that White Americans will be a minority by the end of the 21st century:*

According to an estimate by the U.S. Census Bureau, 50% of the population will be White in 2050 (compared to 70% in 2000). Hispanics will comprise approximately 25% of the population in 2050, while Asian Americans and African Americans will each account for about 13% at that time.

These statistics illustrate the growth of diversity in the United States. However, based on recent events, it seems that some individuals will continue to define American culture in terms of European heritage and will support legislation to preserve this definition.

➔ **EXAMPLE** The drive to designate English as the official language of the United States is strong in areas with large Spanish-speaking populations. In 2006, three quarters of Arizonian voters supported a proposition to make English the state's official language.



A bumper sticker demanding that immigrants speak English reflects a perception that recent immigrants have not assimilated into American culture.

“English-only laws” are one way in which some express their opposition to increasing diversity. During the 2008 presidential campaign, and throughout his presidency, the “birther movement” claimed that **Barack Obama** had not been born in the United States and, therefore, could not serve as president. Obama, the son of a Kenyan immigrant and an American woman, was born in Hawaii. Members of the “birther movement” have also advocated the repeal of the Fourteenth Amendment provision that grants citizenship to anyone born in the United States.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Barack Obama

First African American president of the United States who served in office from 2009 to 2017 after running on a campaign of “hope and change” that appealed to American voters looking for an alternative to the ongoing conflict in the Middle East and the economic recession at home.

Some supporters of “English-only laws” argue that they are necessary because immigrants are unwilling to assimilate into American society. Some extremists in the “birther movement” would limit U.S. citizenship to Whites. Given the demographic factors mentioned previously, it is clear that racial and ethnic diversity are here to stay, but it is also clear that views regarding immigration and race will range between restriction and tolerance.

2. What Is a Marriage?

The debate over same-sex marriage in the early 21st century was an important continuation of the “**culture wars**.” Growing acceptance of homosexuality by Americans, and simultaneous reconsideration of the traditional definition of marriage, was one of the most significant social changes of the period.



TERM TO KNOW

Culture Wars

Social and political conflicts between conservative and liberal values in the United States during the late 20th and early 21st centuries.



DID YOU KNOW

In 2001, almost three quarters of Americans said they knew someone who was gay, lesbian, or bisexual. In the 1990s, support for legal, same-sex marriage was not widespread. Neither the Republican nor the Democratic Party supported it. Federal legislation, including the 1996 **Defense of Marriage Act** (DOMA) indicated that the federal government was opposed to the legalization of same-sex marriage.



TERM TO KNOW

Defense of Marriage Act

Defined marriage as a union between a man and a woman; denied same-sex couples from receiving federal benefits.

Like the civil rights movement of the mid-20th century, the initial victories on behalf of same-sex marriage were won at the state level, in the court system. In 2000, Vermont allowed same-sex couples to join in state-recognized civil unions—a legal arrangement in which they enjoyed all of the legal rights and privileges of marriage. Civil unions created legal relationships that were equivalent to marriage, though the word “marriage” was not used to describe them. In 2004, the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that barring gay and lesbian people from marrying violated the state constitution. The court also ruled that offering same-sex couples civil union instead of marriage was discriminatory. As a result of the court’s decision, Massachusetts became the first state to allow same-sex marriage.

However, not all states followed Massachusetts’ lead in this matter.



DID YOU KNOW

Between 1998 and 2012, 30 states banned same-sex marriage—by statute or by amending their constitutions.

In 2008, opponents of same-sex marriage introduced a ballot initiative In California called Proposition 8, which defined marriage as a union between a man and a woman. Despite strong support for a broader definition of marriage, the proposition was voted into law.



(a)



(b)

Supporters and protesters of same-sex marriage gathered in front of San Francisco’s City Hall (a) as the California Supreme Court decided the fate of Proposition 8, a 2008 ballot initiative that stated that “only marriage between a man and a woman” would be valid in California. Following the Iowa Supreme Court’s decision to legalize same-sex marriage, supporters rallied in Iowa City on April 3, 2009 (b). The banner displays the Iowa state motto: “Our liberties we prize and our rights we will maintain.”

credit a: modification of work by Jamison Wieser; credit b: modification of work by Alan Light

Like other social issues related to the “culture wars,” the debate over same-sex marriage was divided along generational and religious lines. Many young Americans, known as millennials, were more likely to support same-sex marriage and gay rights than older Americans. According to a recent “Religious Landscape Study” by the Pew Research Group, 76% of adults who stated that religion was very important to them opposed same-sex marriage.

Changing attitudes toward same-sex marriage helped the Obama administration to initiate reforms on behalf of gay rights. In 2011, the administration reviewed Department of Defense policies, an undertaking that resulted in the repeal of the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy.



TERM TO KNOW

“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”

The policy on military service by homosexual and bisexual individuals implemented by the Clinton administration.

In June 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Obergefell v. Hodges* that same-sex marriage was a constitutional right. The decision overturned federal laws, including the Defense of Marriage Act, and state laws including the one that had resulted from Proposition 8 in California. At the time of the court’s decision, one poll indicated that approximately two thirds of Americans supported same-sex marriage. The court’s ruling and the evolution of views on same-sex marriage were evidence of one of the most rapid social transformations in U.S. history.

3. What Is Climate Change?

Although most Americans no longer opposed same-sex marriage, they remained divided on other issues. One of the most polarizing was global climate change.

Concerns that industrial emissions, automobile exhaust, and other types of air pollution were causing changes in the Earth’s climate were first expressed during the mid-20th century.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In 1931, Thomas Midgley invented Freon, the first of many chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) used in refrigerators, air conditioners, and other devices. It was subsequently discovered that when CFCs were released into the environment, they damaged the ozone layer of the Earth’s atmosphere. In 1958, scientist Charles David Keeling charted a gradual increase in the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Based on this data, scientists have discovered a steady rise in atmospheric temperature.

Despite near-unanimity in the scientific community that climate change is real; that it is, in part, the result of human actions; and that it will have devastating consequences, Americans are divided on the issue along partisan lines. Some Republicans have discredited evidence that global warming is the result of human activity, including industrial emissions and deforestation. Others deny that atmospheric temperatures are increasing. They believe that climate change is a hoax perpetrated by environmental activists.

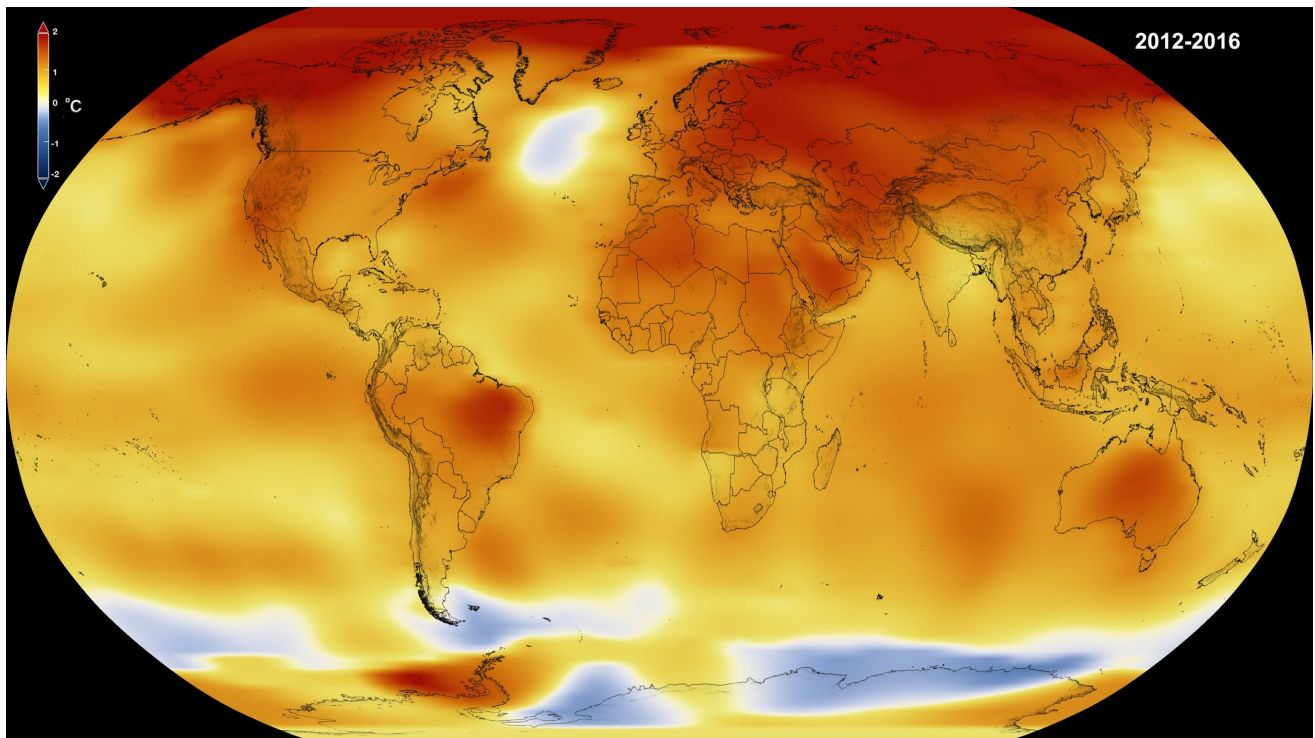


DID YOU KNOW

In January 2017, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA) reported that, in 2016, surface temperatures on Earth were the warmest since recordkeeping began in 1880.

Additional Resource

View [NASA’s](#) global warming graphic that displays surface temperatures between 1880 and 2016.



An image from NASA and NOAA's 2017 report showing that the surface temperature in some parts of the world was almost 2 °F above average.

Source: Nasa.gov

Industry pressure and partisan politics obscured objective science and research. In 2006, the Bush administration was accused of suppressing scientific reports on climate change, based on a Union of Concerned Scientists survey of 1,600 climate scientists. Nearly three fourths of the scientists who participated in the survey believed that their research had been evaluated according to new administrative requirements; that their research had undergone third-party editing to change conclusions; or that they had been pressured not to use some terms, including “global warming.” In 2017, it was reported that fossil fuel giant Exxon-Mobil had suppressed evidence of climate change discovered by company scientists and had funded publicity campaigns to discredit global warming.

News coverage of global warming and the work of environmental activists presented an alternative view of climate change, one based on the reality of the phenomenon, to the public.

➔ **EXAMPLE** In 2006, former Vice President Al Gore released a documentary film titled *An Inconvenient Truth*. The film presented the reality and dangers of global warming in terms that a general audience could easily understand. It grossed \$24 million domestically and won the 2007 Academy Award for Best Documentary.

For the immediate future, it seems unlikely that scientific evidence will be sufficient to bridge the partisan divide over global warming. Democrats have included a climate change plank in their platform in recent elections. They dismiss Republicans as climate change deniers. Republican candidates who believe in global warming and want the government to respond to it risk alienating conservatives who dismiss climate change and corporations that oppose additional regulations. Americans continue to express their opinions on the issue in public forums, including cable television, radio, and social media. They remain divided regarding climate change as environmental groups, talk show hosts, and others try to influence their thinking.



SUMMARY

Knowledge of history and historical thinking skills can provide a valuable perspective on the social issues of the day. Although immigration has been an important issue throughout U.S. history, its continuation and the nation's increasing diversity show that racial politics will remain important. The “culture wars”—a term coined in the 1980s—continue today and include debates regarding gay rights. Following the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision, it appears that the term “marriage” has been redefined—not only legally, but in the perspectives of many Americans. It also seems likely that climate change will remain a divisive issue for years to come.

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ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Welcome to America--Now Speak English bumper sticker](#) | License: Creative Commons



TERMS TO KNOW

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