

LESSON 01 : A GENERAL OVERVIEW OF AMERICAN CULTURE

The United States has often been referred to as the “Great Melting Pot”, a metaphor that connotes the blending of many cultures, languages and religions to form a single national identity. But recent developments tend towards cultural diversity, pluralism and the image of a “salad bowl” rather than a melting pot.

1. The Structure of the American Society

Today the USA is an ethnically and racially diverse country as a result of large-scale immigration from many different countries throughout its history. The USA is, in fact, a society made of immigrants.

American society is a complex system of groups, categories, cultures, and institutions. It is not a single homogenous mass or a “majority” with an assortment of divergent “minorities”. Everyone is a minority in some way or another. This raises the question of how the U.S. has become such a plural society, which is roughly the question of immigration and settlement in the new nation. Americans come in all colors, have all types of religion, and speak many languages from all over the world.

Debate over immigration is neither new nor uncommon in the U.S. history. Today, as during earlier periods of mass migration to the U.S., integrating newcomers into the American mainstream is a dynamic process that requires adaptation and change not only on the part of immigrants, but also by the receiving communities, public institutions and private entities. Since their earliest days, cities like Los Angeles, New York and Chicago have received – indeed, have been built by – large influxes of immigrants. In recent years, thousands of smaller U.S. towns and cities have begun to experience the cultural transformation that comes with welcoming sizable proportions of immigrants into their populations. From the South to the Midwest and the West Coast, growing numbers of immigrants are settling in areas populated

mostly by the descendants of the 19th- and early 20th-century European immigrants, creating challenges and opportunities for newcomers and established residents alike.

⇒ **Is the American society a melting pot or salad bowl?**

The USA is traditionally called a melting pot because with time, generations of immigrants melted together: they abandoned their cultures to become totally assimilated into the American society; they slowly have become Americans. But today the trend towards regarding the U.S. as a salad bowl society, where immigrants are integrated into the American society but they keep their own cultures and traditions, is promoted.

2. A View of the U.S. Culture

Core American culture was established by Protestant British colonists and shaped by the frontier settlement process, with the traits derived passed down to descendants and transmitted to immigrants through assimilation. With immigrants coming from different countries within the past five centuries, the U.S. has become home to many cultures and a wide variety of ethnic groups, traditions and values. Today, mainstream American culture is a Western culture largely derived from the traditions of European immigrants with influences from many other sources, such as traditions brought by slaves from Africa. More recent immigration from Asia and Latino America has added to the cultural mix. However, the U.S. culture is often described by means of white Protestant culture.

Americans have traditionally been characterized by a strong work ethic, competitiveness, and individualism as well as a unifying belief in an “American creed” emphasizing liberty, equality, private property, democracy, rule of law, and a preference for limited government.

The American Dream, or the perception that American enjoy high social mobility, plays a key role in attracting immigrants. While mainstream culture holds that the U.S. is a classless society, scholars identify significant differences between the country’s social classes, affecting socialization, language and values. Americans’ self-images, social viewpoints, and cultural

expectations are associated with their occupations to an unusually close degree. While Americans tend greatly to value socioeconomic achievement, being ordinary or average is generally seen as a positive attribute.

3. Religion in the U.S.

Historically, the U.S. religious tradition has been dominated by Protestant Christianity. Today, up to 70% of the Americans identify as Christian. Among them 44% are White. Christian Protestants (White and Non-white) represent (45%), Catholics (White and Non-white) are (22%). The latter constitutes the largest Christian denomination, as Protestants belong to a variety of denominations. In addition to these two largest Christian groups, there are up to nearly 3% other identified Christian beliefs (Latter-day Saint (Mormon), Jehovah's Witness, and Orthodox Christian). Also practiced in the U.S. are many other religions, such as Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Mormonism and neo-pagan religions, (Most prominently Wicca) among others. Approximately 23% of American citizens identify as a theist, agnostic, or having no religion.

The government is a secular institution, with what is often called the "separation of church and state" prevailing.

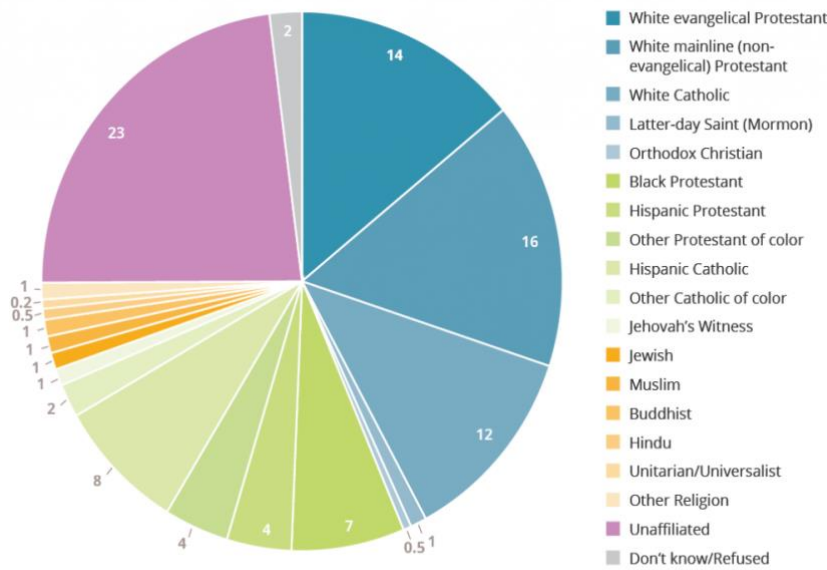
Introduction to American Culture and Civilization

L1 Semester 2

Below are statistics related to religion in the U.S. as for recent censuses

FIGURE 1. The American Religious Landscape in 2020

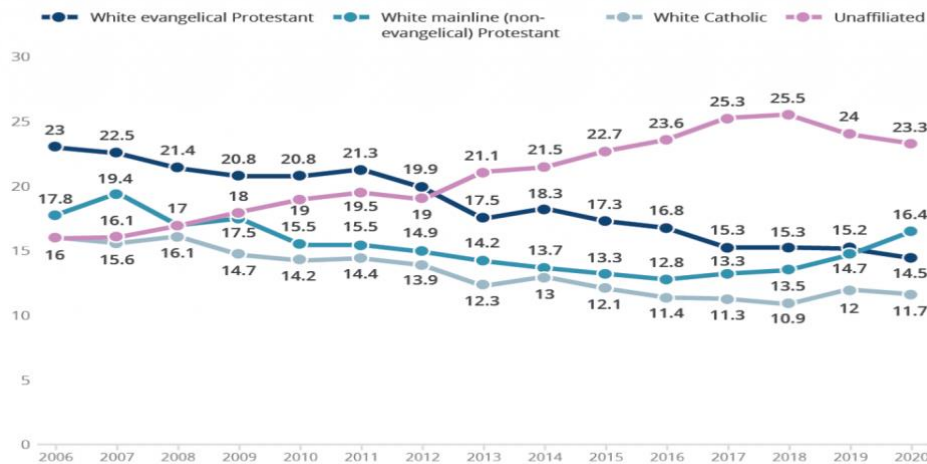
Percent who identify as:



Source: PRRI 2020 American Values Atlas.

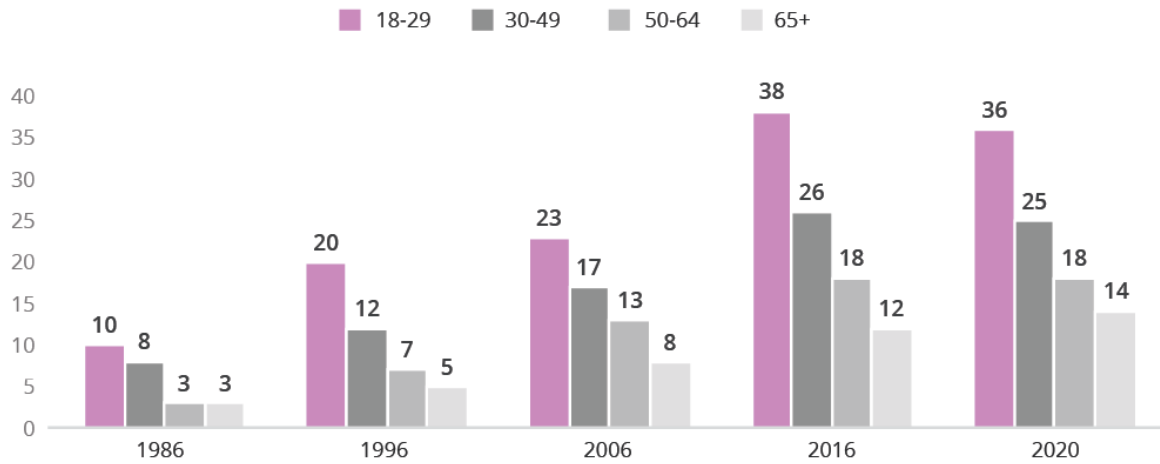
FIGURE 2. Decline of White Christians, Rise of the Unaffiliated Trends Stabilize

Percent who identify as:



Sources: Pew Religion and Public Life Survey, 2006-2009; PRRI Surveys 2010-2012; PRRI, PRRI American Values Atlas, 2013-2020.

FIGURE 3. More Young Adults are Unaffiliated Today Than in the Past
Religiously unaffiliated, by age cohort, 1986-2020



Sources: General Social Survey, 1986, 1996, 2006; PRRI American Values Atlas, 2016, 2020.

For more information on religious stats and issues in the U.S. visit:

<https://www.pri.org/research/2020-census-of-american-religion/>