

## Can the American Dream Survive the New Multiethnic America? Evidence from Los Angeles<sup>1</sup>

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*Drawing from a survey conducted in Los Angeles, we examine perceptions of achievement and optimism about reaching the American dream among racial, ethnic, and nativity groups. We find blacks and Asian Americans less likely than whites to believe they have reached the American dream. Latinos stand out for their upbeat assessments, with naturalized citizens possessing a stronger sense of achievement and noncitizens generally optimistic that they will eventually fulfill the American dream. We discuss patterns of variation between the racial and ethnic groups as well as variation within each group. Notwithstanding interesting differences along lines of race, ethnicity, and nativity, we find no evidence that the nation's changing ethnic stew has diluted faith in the American dream.*

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**KEY WORDS:** achievement and optimism; American dream; American identity; economic security; immigration; race and ethnicity.

### INTRODUCTION

“The American dream that we were all raised on is a simple but powerful one—if you work hard and play by the rules you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given ability will take you” (Hochschild, 1995:18). With these words, then-President Bill Clinton captured a deeply engrained construct in the social and political culture of the United States. The American dream has lured millions across waters, mountains, and plains with this deceptively simple proposition: All Americans, regardless of their background or origins, have a reasonable chance to achieve success through their own efforts. It is an ideal that has inspired great achievements and led to crushing disappointments.

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Hochschild (1995:xi) has observed that the American dream functions brilliantly as an ideology but provides a poor guide for practice. Not all Americans share it, and some categories of Americans share it less than others. Against those realities, the American dream has withstood considerable societal change, beating out competitors for ideological primacy. Its endurance attests to most Americans' insistence on the dream as an ideal, if not as a reality (Daleiden, 1999; Hochschild, 1995).

Could that widespread faith finally shatter under the profound transformation now underway in the racial and ethnic composition of the United States? Between 2000 and 2008, blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans accounted for 83% of U.S. population growth. Latino and Asian immigrants and their U.S.-born children will make ours a "majority minority" nation before mid-decade (U.S. Census, 2010).

Some analysts have speculated that recent immigration patterns could dilute fundamental tenets of U.S. cultural values and upend the nation's ideological moorings. No less than the esteemed Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington warned that "immense and continuing immigration from Latin America, especially from Mexico" poses "the single most immediate and serious challenge to America's traditional identity" (2004a:31, see also 2004b). Huntington (2004a:41) argued: "There is no Americano dream. There is only the American dream created by an Anglo-Protestant society. Mexican Americans will share in that dream and in that society only if they dream in English." If Huntington is correct, recent growth in new ethnic/racial populations may diminish overall levels of attachment to the American dream.

If diversity threatens the ideology of the American dream, the society based on the ideology is threatened too. Ideals do matter. Individuals who are pessimistic about their lack of social and political opportunities are more likely to engage in criminal activity, have lower levels of self-esteem and efficacy, are less likely to pursue higher levels of education, and are less likely to plan for the long term (Finkel, 1985; McCord, 1979; Taylor and Betz, 1983). In short, dilution of the American dream could have significant and troubling consequences for U.S. society.

The City of Los Angeles is an ideal laboratory to gauge whether the nation's increasing diversity threatens attachment to the American dream. One of the most racially and ethnically diverse cities in the United States, Los Angeles is also home to one of the largest concentrations of immigrants. A recent public opinion survey from this demographically diverse city provides a rich data set with which to examine confidence in the American dream among various racial, ethnic, and immigrant populations. National polls on this topic have contained insufficient numbers of ethnic minorities and foreign-born residents to deduce general patterns for these populations. Nor are we aware of any research that has incorporated statistical comparisons between new nonwhite immigrant groups such as Latinos and Asian Americans, their native-born counterparts, and black and white Americans.

The Los Angeles survey's rich sample of diverse racial, ethnic, and nativity populations also enables us to consider possible subgroup differences *within* racial and ethnic populations, an avenue of investigation absent in the current body of literature. The nation's diversity of cultures and sociohistorical legacies provides ample reason to consider whether racial and ethnic groups hold a common vision of the American dream and whether it applies to them. Also, analyzing variation within each racial, ethnic, and nativity population yields a more nuanced understanding of why groups may differ in their assessments of the American dream.

We have twin-fold objectives in this article. We first consider the similarities and differences in how racial and ethnic groups assess their progress and prospects in reaching the American dream. Finding several intergroup differences, we next investigate patterns of variation within each racial or ethnic group that may underlie the gross intergroup differences. To accomplish these twin objectives, we start by reviewing the rich literature examining the American dream to formulate our hypothesis for the racial and ethnic groups we consider here. We then test our expectations using the 2007 Center for the Study of Los Angeles citywide survey, beginning by observing response patterns *across* the four major racial and ethnic groups in the United States (whites, blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans). We then proceed to examine patterns *within* each of the four demographic groups.

We find that Latinos and particularly naturalized Latinos are more likely to believe that they have *already* achieved the American dream; however, we find that there are no racial/ethnic group differences in perceptions of achieving the American dream in the *future*. Thus, we find no evidence that the nation's changing ethnic stew has diluted faith in the American dream. Interestingly, in this period of economic uncertainty, we find respondents' anxiety about the sufficiency of retirement savings clouds their confidence about achieving the American dream, regardless of their race or ethnicity. This result suggests that cracked nest eggs and other economic anxieties—should they become a permanent or pervasive feature of U.S. society—may pose a bigger threat to the American dream than the nation's changing multiethnic stew.

## RACE, ETHNICITY, AND NATIVITY

Many scholars have mined polling data to examine how ideas about the American dream differ among rich and poor Americans, among black and white Americans, and how these ideas have shifted over time. Of these, Jennifer Hochschild's 1995 study remains the gold standard. Analyzing decades of survey data, Hochschild (1995) found that faith in the American dream differs significantly for blacks and whites and along lines of income, education, and gender. Although Hochschild (1995) considers the views of white ethnics, she does not explicitly examine the beliefs of Latinos or Asian

Americans—the so-called new immigrants (see also Feagin, 1972; Huber and Form, 1973; Kluegel and Smith, 1986; Robinson and Bell, 1978). In this section, we will discuss why we expect differences across racial and ethnic groups and within-group differences.

### *Blacks*

We suspect race is highly correlated with respondents' evaluations of their achievements and prospects in reaching the American dream. A central tenet of the ideology of the American dream holds that hard work leads to success, a notion blacks regard with particular skepticism, according to previous studies. Whereas a majority of whites blame blacks' lower socioeconomic standing on blacks not trying hard enough, blacks are much more likely to attribute this disparity to lack of opportunity in the United States (Hanson and Zogby, 2010; Hochschild, 1995; Schuman et al., 1997).

Blacks' long and turbulent history in the United States from slavery to Jim Crow to current concerns about racial profiling and political disenfranchisement has led a sizable portion of blacks to be doubtful that the United States is the land of opportunity for all (Schuman et al., 1997; Sigelman and Welch, 1991). Moreover, higher levels of cynicism about the American dream now than in previous years may be attributed to blacks' frustration with their lack of economic and social opportunities even after *de jure* barriers to equality have been removed with the 1964 Civil Rights Act. As Thomas Shapiro, the Director of the Institute on Assets and Social Policy, notes: "Even when African Americans do everything right—get an education and work hard at well-paying jobs—they cannot achieve the wealth of their white peers in the workforce" (Shapiro et al., 2010).

Studies on racial differences in overall life satisfaction also provide reason to anticipate blacks will be less optimistic about the American dream. Wolfers and Stevenson (2010) report that the gap between blacks' and whites' levels of life satisfaction were growing smaller between 1970 and 1990 but began to grow again during the 2000s. They find that wealthier blacks have lower levels of life satisfaction than poorer whites. If blacks are generally less happy about their standing in the United States than whites, even though some are enjoying greater prosperity, it would not be surprising to find blacks as a group less optimistic about someday attaining their aspirations.

Given their history in the United States and the inequalities they continue to face, we anticipate that blacks are less likely than whites to believe that they have or will reach the American dream (Kohut, 2007; Sinclair-Chapman and Price, 2008). Finding blacks less satisfied with their achievements and less optimistic about their prospects would be consistent with Hochschild's (1995:72–88) conclusion that blacks are "succeeding more" by objective measures but "enjoying it less" on opinion measures.

*Latinos and Asian Americans*

We are less confident in predicting the perceptions of Latinos and Asian Americans, but we suspect Latinos and Asian Americans may be more likely than whites to view the American dream as an ideal that lies within their grasp. Previous studies indicate that Latinos are more likely than whites to believe that the U.S. government will do what is right most of the time, to be patriotic, to believe ordinary individuals can influence government decisions, and to believe hard work leads to success (Abrajano and Alvarez, 2010; De La Garza et al., 1996; Michelson, 2001; Newton and Salvanto, 2005). Sanguine outlooks on the U.S. social and political system could well spill over onto Latinos' perceptions of their own prospects and achievements in reaching the American dream.

What would account for Latinos' optimism given their lower levels of socioeconomic status? The answer may lie in their large immigrant populations and a self-selection effect of immigrants who choose to migrate and stay in the United States. Many Latino immigrants who settle in to the United States do so because they believe that the United States provides better social, economic, and political opportunities than their home country (Wampler et al., 2009). In effect, those immigrants who stay permanently and those who leave may be voting with their feet, rendering their verdicts regarding their opportunities in the United States (Wampler et al., 2009).

The process of socialization represents an additional reason why we expect optimism among Latinos and Asian Americans. It is plausible that the optimism pervasive across the first generation may also be transmitted to subsequent generations born and raised in the United States. Previous studies indicate that parental socialization can influence an offspring's partisanship and political attitudes, career aspirations, and notions of ideal family size (Dalton, 1982; Hitlin, 2006; Jennings and Niemi, 1981; Starrels and Holmes, 2000). It would not, therefore, be entirely surprising if optimistic Latino and Asian-American parents in the first generation socialize their children in the second generation to believe that the United States provides the opportunity for success.

On balance, we expect that Latinos as a group, unlike blacks and whites, are predominately composed of first- or second-generation Americans,<sup>4</sup> to exhibit greater optimism about the American dream. We anticipate a similar phenomenon among the Asian-American population, that is, generally optimistic foreign-born parents passing on faith in the possibilities open to all Americans.

Moreover, given that a large proportion of immigrants enter the United States with lower levels of income and education, second and subsequent generations in the Latino and Asian-American community may have a lower

<sup>4</sup> A 2009 Pew Center Survey shows that nearly 65% of Latinos are in the first or second generation. A majority of Latinos are in the second generation (52%) (Fry and Passel, 2009).

benchmark for success in America (Portes et al., 1978). Previous studies have shown that perceptions of an individual's achievements in life are often measured by assessing success relative to the person's parents' success and/or their progress on several social and economic measures (Judge and Hurst, 2007). As long-settled Asian-American and Latino immigrants and their native-born children continue to make progress on indicators such as poverty rates, educational attainment, and English-language acquisition, their levels of optimism in the American dream may also continue to grow (Park, 1997). We expect Asian Americans, who have higher median levels of income and education than other racial/ethnic groups,<sup>5</sup> to be particularly likely to believe that they have achieved the American dream.

## THE NEW IMMIGRANTS AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

A key advantage of the Los Angeles data set is that it enables us to examine variation along lines of nativity among Asian Americans and Latinos. It is plausible that despite generally lower levels of socioeconomic status, immigrants possess relatively upbeat assessments of their progress and prospects in reaching the American dream. Many immigrants come to the United States because they believe the United States affords superior opportunities compared with those of their home countries, and immigrants who settle here permanently may be more optimistic about their opportunities in the United States than are their counterparts who leave (Park, 1997; Wampler et al., 2009). In effect, the pool of Asian and Latino immigrants may be a self-selected bunch, optimistic that the American dream is within their reach. Together with the finding of Portes et al. (1978) that Latino immigrants have lower benchmarks for occupational success than their white counterparts, we expect Latinos and Asian-American immigrants who have enjoyed some success in the United States to be more optimistic about the American dream than their native-born counterparts who have achieved the same level of success.

## DIVERSITY WITHIN EACH RACIAL AND ETHNIC GROUP

To gain a better understanding of gross patterns across the racial and ethnic groups, we explore differences *within* each population, and nativity is but one characteristic we examine. With the exception of African Americans, we also anticipate intragroup variation along social class lines. Individuals may have different images of what constitutes success in life, but most associate the American dream with material success (Hochschild, 1995:15). Previous studies

<sup>5</sup> According to the 2007 Current Population Survey, Asian Americans have higher levels of income and education of all other racial/ethnic groups.

lead us to expect that whites, Asian Americans, and Latinos with greater levels of income and education will possess sunnier assessments of their achievements and life chances compared with their less materially well-off co-ethnics (Feagin, 1972; Haveman and Smeeding, 2006; Huber and Form, 1973; Kluegel and Smith, 1986; Robinson and Bell, 1978).

We do not anticipate this pattern based on social class to hold true for blacks. Others have found comparatively affluent and highly educated blacks take a dimmer view of their opportunities, their ability to shape their own destinies, and to be more cognizant of discrimination than are less well-off blacks (Gay, 2004; Hochschild, 1995). Based on previous studies, we expect blacks' socioeconomic status exerts a minor effect, if any, on their perceptions of the American dream. If even blacks who have succeeded in the United States are pessimistic about the American dream, then it will be difficult to close the gap in optimism between blacks and whites.

We are also interested in whether marital and family status is associated with respondents' perception of their progress toward the American dream, and whether the association is uniform for all racial and ethnic groups. The image of a happy family gathered around the hearth is, for some, the embodiment of the American dream. On objective measures, married couples are less likely to be in poverty, have longer life expectancies, and are more likely to be homeowners (Astone and McLanahan, 1991; Brown and Booth, 1996; Popenoe, 1993). Some scholars have linked life outcomes and life satisfaction for blacks and Latinos to a strong family nucleus, leading us to anticipate that for Latinos and blacks in particular, perceptions regarding the American dream are correlated with family structure (Clark, 1984; Garcia, 2003; Parillo, 1991; Rumbaut, 1997).

Finally, regardless of race, we expect homeownership status to be strongly associated with opinions regarding the American dream above and beyond other measures of material well-being. We also anticipate financial anxieties to depress confidence in the American dream. Equity in owned homes and subsidies for ownership embedded in the U.S. tax code have made homeownership a source of economic security and a significant source of intergenerational mobility. Homeownership also conveys social status—a sign that one “has made it.” For some, homeownership constitutes the American dream itself (Hughes and Zimmerman, 1993). We expect homeowners' greater faith in the American dream to operate independently of other demographic traits, such as income or gender (Hayden, 2002) and regardless of neighborhood quality (Reid, 2007). If so, homeownership may serve as a great booster, smoothing racial and ethnic group opinion differences regarding the American dream.

Conversely, individuals who are fretful about their financial security may be hesitant about claiming to have achieved the American dream and less confident of doing so someday. In the U.S. capitalist system, financial security may have a close association with the American dream (Feagin, 1972; Haveman and Smeeding, 2006; Huber and Form, 1973; Kluegel and Smith, 1986). Conversely, individuals fearful about their financial security are likely

to feel greater pessimism about fulfilling their dreams. As homeownership may boost hopefulness, financial worries may depress faith in the American dream. We doubt any particular racial or ethnic group would be immune to these influences.

## DATA

To determine the relationship between race and the American dream we use a survey conducted in 2007 by researchers at Loyola Marymount University's Leavey Center for the Study of Los Angeles. Marking the 15th anniversary of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, pollsters interviewed 1,651 city residents by telephone on such topics as the political reforms instituted in response to the riots, race and ethnic relations, immigration, and matters of public policy. As part of the poll, Los Angeles residents were asked if they had reached the American dream or if they believed they would do so someday. Respondents were drawn from an ethnically and racially stratified sample of listed residential telephone exchanges. As is the case in many U.S. urban areas, high levels of ethnic and racial separation characterize most of Los Angeles' residential neighborhoods. The stratified sampling design ensured a representative survey of opinion among the city's racial and ethnic groups (Barreto et al., 2006).

### *Dependent Variables*

We derive our dependent variables from the following survey question: "With regard to the American dream, do you think you have already reached it, will reach it in the future or will not reach it any time in your lifetime?" Our first dependent variable is a dichotomous measure we code 1 for respondents who answered "have already reached it" and 0 for others. For our second dependent variable, we examine *only* respondents who feel that they have not yet reached the American dream. We code as 1 those respondents who affirm that they will reach the American dream in their lifetime and as 0 respondents who doubt they will do so.

### *Independent Variables*

Our main independent variables of interest are four dichotomous variables that account for the race/ethnicity of the respondent. To better isolate the effects of race and nativity on perceptions of the American dream, we also include controls for age, income, education, sex, and employment status, as well as several other controls including family status (marital status, number of children). We also control for forward-looking opinions, including respondents' fears about their personal safety (expectations about falling victim to



gang violence) and their financial outlooks (expectations regarding the adequacy of their retirement savings, their plans to purchase a home, and their worries about themselves or a family member losing a job). In addition to individual demographic traits and opinions, we consider the respondents' residential context (levels of crime in their zip code, median housing value in their Census tract, and percent minorities in their Census tract).<sup>6</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

We create two sets of logit regression models for our two dependent variables. Our initial set of regressions includes the entire sample of respondents so that we may make comparisons across racial and ethnic groups. With this sample, we first consider the characteristics of respondents who report having achieved the American dream. Our second logit regression enables us to identify characteristics of those who have not yet achieved the American dream, but remain optimistic that they will someday. In the second logit analysis, we exclude respondents who already believe that they have achieved the American dream. We then replicate these two initial regression models for each of our four racial and ethnic groups. Whereas our initial analyses enable us to make statistical comparisons between the racial and ethnic groups, this second set of analyses reveals characteristics likely associated with the belief in the American dream within each of the racial or ethnic populations.

Because the substantive meanings of logit coefficients are difficult to interpret beyond sign and significance, we perform a postestimation analysis for each regression model. Here, we measure the change in the dependent variable when the independent variable of interest changes from its minimum value to its maximum value, holding all other variables at their mean (see Long and Freese, 2001).

## RESULTS

Table I displays the percent of respondents who believe that they have already achieved the American dream, will reach the American dream, and individuals who believe that they will never achieve the American dream, disaggregated by race or ethnicity.<sup>7</sup> Consistent with previous studies on this topic (Hochschild, 1995), the results in Table I indicate that whites are the most likely to believe they have achieved the American dream, followed by Asian Americans. As we expected, blacks tend to be the least likely to say that they have achieved the American dream.

<sup>6</sup> See the Supplemental Appendix for coding of the independent variables.

<sup>7</sup> See the Supplemental Appendix for more information on the average and median age, income, and education of respondents who believe that they have, will, or will never reach the American dream disaggregated by race or ethnicity.

**Table I.** Percent of Respondents Who Believe That They Have Reached the American Dream, Will Reach the American Dream, or Will *Never* Reach the American Dream by Race/Ethnicity

Variable	Whites	Blacks	Latino	Asian American
Already reached American dream	48.35%	21.75%	24.34%	29.50%
Will reach American dream	19.17%	46.63%	64.07%	45.68%
Will never reach American dream	32.48%	31.62%	11.59%	24.82%

Asian Americans and Latinos, the two groups with the highest immigrant populations, are the most optimistic about their chances of one day achieving the American dream. Whereas about one-third of blacks and whites who have not reached the American dream doubt that they ever will, fewer than a quarter of Asian Americans lack faith that they will eventually reach that milestone. Latinos stand out for their optimism regarding their chances of reaching the American dream. Latinos are almost six times more likely to believe they will eventually achieve the American dream if they have not already than they are to doubt ever doing so.

The results presented in Table I suggest that race and ethnicity play a powerful role in shaping individual attitudes towards the American dream. To ensure these differences are not merely artifices of sociodemographic differences among the racial and ethnic groups, particularly income, education, and nativity status, we employ logistic regression analysis to isolate the effect of the race and ethnicity of respondents on their beliefs in the American dream.

Table II displays two sets of logit regression models. Model 1A summarizes the results for those who believe they have *already* reached the American dream, and Model 1B summarizes the results for those who expect to reach the American dream in the future if they have not already. The results displayed for Model 1A affirm the powerful impact of racial and ethnic identity on outlooks. Blacks and Asian Americans are significantly less likely than whites to believe they have achieved the American dream. For blacks, this result is expected. However, it is noteworthy that Asian Americans are less satisfied with their life achievements given their high levels of income and education. Also noteworthy is that Latinos are significantly more confident than whites to believe that they have reached that milestone, holding other variables constant.

Figure 1 displays the postlogistic regression predicted probabilities for significant variables in the models. The figure illustrates that differences between the racial and ethnic groups are not only statistically significant, but are also substantial in magnitude. Asian Americans and blacks are almost 10% less likely than whites to believe that they have achieved the American dream, holding other variables at their mean. Conversely, Latinos are 23% more likely than whites to believe that they have achieved the American dream. Citizenship status also appears to temper one's views of life achievement, with those who have yet to attain American citizenship 10% less likely to believe that have achieved the American dream than others.

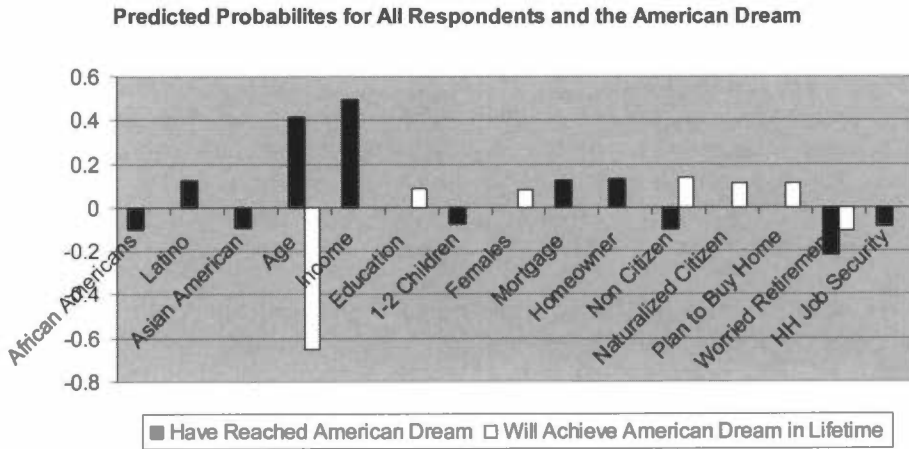
**Table II.** Logit Regression Predicting Whether (A) Respondent Perceives Having Achieved the American Dream or (B) If Not, Respondent Believes He or She Will Achieve the American Dream During His or Her Lifetime

Variables	A Have Reached American Dream	B Will Achieve American Dream in Lifetime
<i>Race</i>		
Black	-.572 (.243)**	.217 (.271)
Latino	.616 (.276)**	.528 (.358)
Asian American	-.560 (.288)*	-.134 (.362)
<i>SES &amp; Sociodemographic</i>		
Age	.029 (.006)***	-.045 (.007)***
Income	.013 (.002)***	.004 (.003)
Education	.036 (.028)	.037 (.034)
Divorced/separated	.093 (.062)	.053 (.070)
Married	.286 (.186)	-.075 (.205)
1-2 children	-.441 (.187)**	.030 (.201)
3 + children	-.064 (.280)	-.024 (.313)
Female	.268 (.150)	.407 (.167)**
Unemployed	-.061 (.045)	-.024 (.052)
Mortgage	.564 (.215)***	.322 (.208)
Homeowner	.650 (.173)***	.049 (.153)
<i>Citizenship Status</i>		
Noncitizen	-.594 (.295)**	.784 (.351)**
Naturalized citizen	.299 (.255)	.619 (.337)*
<i>Perceptions of Future</i>		
Plan to buy home	-.320 (.193)	.634 (.221)***
Retirement savings	-.572 (.110)***	-.288 (.126)**
Job security	-.242 (.102)**	-.040 (.112)
Gang fear	-.036 (.078)	.085 (.090)
<i>Residential Context</i>		
Crime in zip code	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)
Median home price	.000 (.000)	-.000 (.000)
Minority Census tract	.157 (.113)	.119 (.131)
Constant	-2.469 (.757)***	1.626 (.884)*
Observations	1,245	890
LR chi-square	328	154

\*Significant at .10; \*\*significant at .05; \*\*\*significant at .01. Standard errors are in parentheses. Comparison/excluded groups: whites, renters, males, employed Rs, single Rs, Rs with no child, citizens.

In addition to race and nativity, several other factors appear related to a respondent's belief that he or she has achieved the American dream. The results confirm the strong association between homeownership and the American dream.<sup>8</sup> Those who own their home outright are 13% more likely to believe that they have achieved the American dream than are renters. Mortgage-holders are about 12% more likely to believe they have achieved that American dream than are renters. Perceptions of life achievements also seem to be powerfully shaped by time. Residents in their golden years—the

<sup>8</sup> Homeownership is a strong predictor of the American dream; however, Table C in the Supplemental Appendix shows that when the homeownership variables are excluded from the full model the results do not significantly change.



**Fig. 1.** Predicted probabilities for (A) respondents who report having achieved the American dream and (B) respondents who report they will eventually reach the American dream. *Notes:* Min-max are predicted probabilities in which all other independent variables are held at the mean and the change in the dependent variable is measured by taking the difference when the independent variable of interest is changing it from its minimum value to its maximum.

oldest respondents—are 42% more likely to report having reached the American dream than are the youngest respondents.

An individual’s assessment of whether he or she has achieved the American dream also appears tightly linked with economic factors. Income is highly correlated with perceptions of achievement of the American dream. Angelinos with the highest household incomes are 50% more likely to believe that they have achieved the American dream than are the poorest respondents in our data set. Economic insecurities also exert a strong influence on respondents’ degree of satisfaction with their progress in achieving the American dream. Those least confident about the adequacy of their retirement savings were 22% less likely to believe they had reached the American dream, and those expressing concern about job security of household members were 9% less likely to believe that they have achieved the American dream.

None of the other variables were significantly related to an individual’s belief that he or she will reach the American dream. We were particularly surprised that to the extent family status plays any predictive role, the association is negative. Respondents with one or two children are 7% less likely to believe that they have achieved the American dream than those with no children. We focus next on those whom—though they do not yet feel they have reached the American dream—remain optimistic that they will do so someday.

The results highlighted in Table II under Model 1B exclude those who reported that they have reached the American dream and indicate the characteristics likely to be possessed by the steadfast optimists. The predicted probabilities from this estimation are displayed in Fig. 1.

After controlling for several variables, including age, income, and citizenship status, we see no significant differences between the racial and ethnic groups. The results suggest that the large differences between the racial groups that we observed in Table I could be attributed to some other factor. This result also indicates that growing racial diversity in the United States will not have long-term consequences on adherence to the American dream.

Nativity, however, is strongly predictive. Respondents born outside the United States appear to be the most optimistic about their chances of eventually achieving the American dream. Noncitizens are 14% more likely and naturalized citizens are 11% more likely to believe they will achieve the American dream than are native-born citizens. These results provide nothing to indicate that new immigrants have weakened the American dream's grip on the imagination of a demographically transforming America.

Only a handful of variables are correlated with respondents' beliefs that they will achieve the American dream if they have not already reached that milestone. Age—positively associated with a respondent's belief that he or she has already reached the American dream—is negatively associated with an individual's belief that he or she will reach the American dream if the individual has not done so yet. Pessimism reigns among the oldest respondents who have not achieved the American dream. They are a whopping 65% less likely than the youngest respondents to believe that they will reach the American dream in the future.

Respondents with higher levels of education are more optimistic about the possibility of achieving the American dream in their lifetime, with a 9% spread between the most highly educated and the least educated. In light of persistent gender inequalities in the United States, we were surprised that women are more likely than men to believe that they will achieve the American dream, a difference of approximately 7% holding all other variables at their mean.

Confidence in the American dream is also associated with other measures of confidence in the future. Renters planning to become homeowners within the year are 11% more likely than other renters to expect they will someday achieve the American dream. Respondents who are skeptical about the adequacy of their retirement savings are the most hesitant to believe that they will achieve the American dream in their lifetime.

Our focus in this initial analysis on the general population has given us the opportunity to examine the differences *between* each racial and ethnic group. Using the same dependent variables, we shift now to an inspection of differences *within* each racial and ethnic group.

Given the contentious debate over immigration in recent years, we are particularly interested to find that naturalized Latinos are 12% more likely to believe they have achieved the American dream than U.S.-born Latinos. The results in Table III and Fig. 2, which present corresponding predicted probabilities, suggest that Latinos who become citizens take a lot of pride in this achievement. Citizenship status had no recognizable impact for other groups.

**Table III.** Logit Regression Predicting Whether Respondent Perceives Having Already Reached the American Dream by Race or Ethnicity

Variables	Black	Asian American	White	Latino
Age	.020 (.014)	.024 (.012)**	.041 (.014)***	.027 (.012)*
Income	.024 (.006)***	.012 (.004)***	.013 (.004)***	.011 (.005)*
Education	.066 (.069)	.039 (.054)	.095 (.065)	.030 (.059)
Divorced/separated	.149 (.120)	.192 (.131)	.102 (.132)	-.004 (.219)
Married	-.153 (.427)	.681 (.483)	.391 (.388)	.454 (.347)
1-2 children	-1.249 (.502)**	-.694 (.400)	.239 (.422)	-.373 (.345)
3 + children	.373 (.570)	.031 (.806)	-.810 (.862)	-.244 (.448)
Female	.079 (.340)	.846 (.302)***	-.259 (.349)	.175 (.295)
Mortgage	.875 (.431)**	.197 (.379)	.899 (.414)**	.850 (.343)*
Unemployed	-.066 (.078)	-.073 (.136)	-.368 (.562)	-.309 (.499)
Homeowner	.349 (.490)	.464 (.495)	1.010 (.462)**	1.440 (.532)**
<i>Citizenship Status</i>				
Noncitizen	(a)	-.904 (.708)	-1.391 (1.062)	-.353 (.462)
Naturalized citizen	.291 (.903)	-.163 (.658)	-.521 (.759)	.672 (.407)+
<i>Perceptions of Future</i>				
Plan to buy home	.287 (.410)	-.341 (.451)	-1.049 (.550)	-.488 (.311)
Retirement savings	-.622 (.244)**	-.630 (.226)***	-.766 (.262)***	-.514 (.219)*
Job security	.004 (.213)	-.415 (.218)	-.110 (.239)	-.304 (.209)
Gang fear	-.119 (.172)	-.055 (.156)	-.138 (.199)	.169 (.152)
<i>Residential Context</i>				
Crime in zip code	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	-.000 (.000)	-.000 (.000)
Median home prices	.000 (.000)	-.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)
Minority Census tract	.042 (.312)	-.085 (.203)	.070 (.352)	.004 (.184)
Constant	-4.38 (1.804)**	-1.600 (1.618)	-3.189 (1.964)	-2.069 (1.581)
Observations	312	327	236	347
LR chi-square	81.95	76.45	80.8	80.36

\*Significant at .10; \*\*significant at 05; \*\*\*significant at .01.

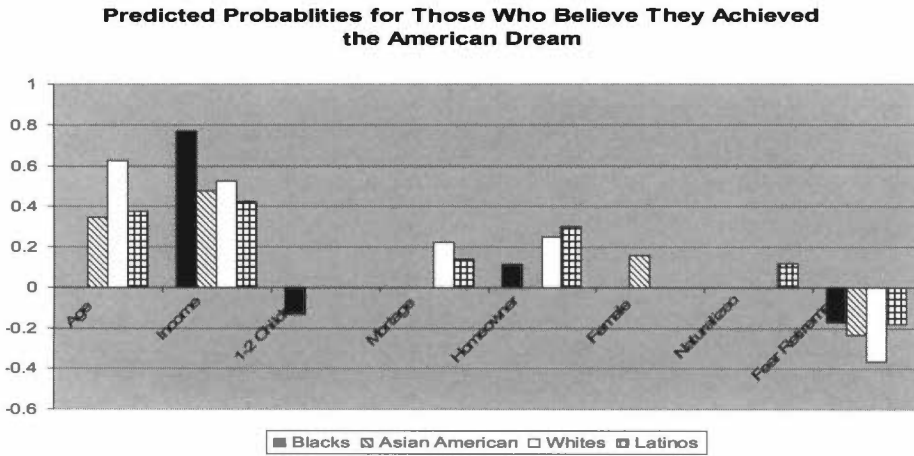
(a) Insufficient number of respondents to run analysis.

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses. Comparison/excluded groups: renters, males, single Rs, Rs with no child, citizens.

With the exception of African Americans, age is positively linked with satisfaction with having achieved the American dream. For whites, age is a particularly robust predictor. Holding other variables at the mean, the oldest whites in the sample were 62% more likely to believe they have achieved the American dream than the youngest whites in the sample.

Income is also strongly related to perceptions of reaching the American dream for all racial and ethnic groups, particularly for blacks. Counter to our expectations, income is strongly and positively associated with blacks' assessment of their life achievements. Blacks with the greatest incomes are 77% more likely to believe they have achieved the American dream than are blacks with the smallest incomes. Although income is a positive predictor of the American dream for all groups, anxiety about retirement savings is negatively correlated with respondents' perceptions that they have achieved the American dream, regardless of race or ethnicity.

Despite the many similarities among racial and ethnic groups, there are some noteworthy differences. Blacks with one or two children in the household



**Fig. 2.** Predicted probabilities for respondents who believe they have achieved the American dream by racial and ethnic group.

*Notes:* Min-max are predicted probabilities in which all other independent variables are held at the mean and the change in the dependent variable is measured by taking the difference when the independent variable of interest is changing it from its minimum value to its maximum.

are *less* likely to believe they have achieved the American dream than are blacks without children at home. This result counters our expectation that blacks with families would have a more sanguine outlook of the American dream. However, this result could be based on the additional economic burden that children place on black households as these are more likely to face financial strain. As for homeownership, blacks, whites, and Latinos who own their homes outright are more likely to believe they have reached the American dream than their counterparts who rent. Whites and Asian Americans carrying a mortgage on their homes are also more likely to believe that they have reached the American dream than their racial counterparts who rent. For most groups, gender did not account for large differences in views of the American dream. However, Asian-American females were 16% more likely to believe they have achieved the American dream than their male counterparts.

As we found that naturalized citizens were more likely to believe that they have achieved the American dream in Table III, the results in Table IV indicate that nativity status also tempers one's belief that the American dream will be achieved in the future. Among Latinos and Asian Americans, citizenship status remains a strong predictor of optimism about someday achieving the American dream. Naturalized Asian Americans are 35% more likely to believe that they will achieve the American dream than native-born Asian Americans. Latinos who are noncitizens are 11% more likely to believe that they will reach the American dream than native-born Latinos.

Just as respondents of different ethnicities who believe that they have reached the American dream share common traits, those confident that they will

**Table IV.** Among Respondents Who Have Not Already Reached the American Dream, Logit Regression Predicting Individual Expectations of Reaching the American Dream During Lifetime Disaggregated by Race and Ethnicity

Independent Variables	Black	Asian American	White	Latino
Age	-.044 (.012)***	-.058 (.014)***	-.082 (.021)***	-.066 (.020)***
Income	-.002 (.006)	.006 (.006)	.002 (.007)	.002 (.008)
Education	-.009 (.070)	.102 (.066)	.239 (.104)**	.073 (.090)
Divorced/separated	-.085 (.107)	.511 (.171)**	.196 (.209)	.103 (.317)
Married	-.188 (.385)	1.023 (.532)*	-.076 (.584)	-.045 (.473)
1-2 children	-.183 (.347)	-.237 (.467)	-.348 (.604)	.692 (.518)
3 + children	-.004 (.564)	-.064 (.918)	(a)	.157 (.632)
Female	.510 (.299)*	.084 (.348)	-.084 (.514)	1.206 (.436)***
Unemployed	-.035 (.256)	-.486 (.743)	-.395 (.526)	-.241 (.608)
Mortgage	.491 (.384)	.234 (.440)	1.96 (.771)**	.449 (.501)
Homeowner	.258 (.440)	-.487 (.702)	-.324 (.684)	.402 (.962)
<i>Citizenship Status</i>				
Noncitizen	(a)	1.150 (.879)	-.493 (1.266)	1.525 (.682)**
Naturalized citizen	.622 (.827)	1.44 (.864)*	-.055 (1.084)	1.014 (.665)
<i>Perceptions of Future</i>				
Plan to buy home	.893 (.383)**	-.271 (.561)	.764 (.701)	1.302 (.494)***
Retirement savings	-.217 (.222)	-.203 (.253)	-1.183 (.456)***	-.599 (.362)*
Job security	-.142 (.185)	-.071 (.253)	-.106 (.351)	.096 (.324)
Gang fear	-.167 (.164)	.365 (.202)*	.883 (.300)***	.237 (.221)
<i>Residential Context</i>				
Crime in zip code	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	-.000 (.001)	-.000 (.000)
Median home price	-.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)*	.000 (.000)
Minority Census tract	.063 (.248)	-.043 (.224)	-.138 (.309)	-.241 (.214)
Constant	4.639 (1.746)***	2.621 (1.675)	1.807 (2.231)	2.343 (2.113)
Observations	246	226	118	258
LR chi	40.32	55.66	41.23	42.21

\*Significant at .10; \*\*significant at .05; \*\*\*significant at .01.

(a) Insufficient number of respondents to run analysis.

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses. Comparison/excluded groups: renters, males, single Rs, Rs with no child, employed Rs, citizens.

eventually do so also have much in common. Not surprisingly, whereas older respondents of all ethnic groups are more likely to believe that they have achieved the American dream, younger respondents of all groups express the greatest optimism about eventually achieving the American dream if they have not already. Once again, age was particularly strongly correlated with perceptions of the American dream for white respondents, with the youngest white respondents 90% more likely to believe that they will achieve the American dream in their lifetime than the oldest whites in the sample. Younger blacks are much more optimistic than older blacks about believing that they will achieve the American dream in their lifetime but, sadly, they are not as optimistic as the youngest respondents in other racial or ethnic groups. Black and Latino females are more optimistic about their chances of achieving the American dream than their male counterparts. Black females are 11% more likely to believe that they will achieve the American dream in their lifetime than are black males.

With regard to homeownership, white mortgage-holders are more likely than white renters to believe they will achieve the American dream one day.



Black renters planning to purchase a home within the year were 18% more likely than black renters who did not plan to purchase a home to believe they would someday achieve the American dream. Latinos expecting to become homeowners were 10% more likely to believe that they will achieve the American dream than other Latino renters.

Fear of gang violence is also correlated with Asian Americans' and whites' optimism about achieving the American dream. This result is intriguing and somewhat surprising given that blacks and Latinos in Los Angeles tend to live in neighborhoods with higher levels of violent crime (Travis, 1999). However, because whites and Asian Americans may be generally insulated from gang violence, this result may be based on heightened fears of the unknown.

Both whites and Latinos who were worried about their retirement savings were skeptical of their abilities to achieve the American dream. This variable had a particularly strong impact for Latinos. Latinos who were most concerned about their retirement were 80% less likely to believe that they would reach the American dream than their counterparts who felt secure about their retirement.

Among Asian Americans, unmarried respondents have less confidence in eventually achieving the American dream than their married counterparts. Married Asian Americans are 30% more likely to believe that they will achieve the American dream than single Asian Americans. Surprisingly, even Asian Americans who are divorced or separated believed themselves to be more likely to achieve the American dream than single Asian Americans. No other racial or ethnic group's view of the American dream was influenced by the family or marriage variables. Finally, whites who have higher levels of education and live in areas with higher median home values are most optimistic about their chances to achieve the American dream.

## DISCUSSION

Our findings underscore the powerful association race, ethnicity, and nativity has with respondents' estimations of their achievement or prospects. Latinos constitute the vast majority of Los Angeles' foreign-born population, and our findings for this group are heartening. Latinos are significantly more likely than whites, holding several variables constant, to believe they have achieved the American dream. It is also noteworthy that noncitizen Latinos are less likely than native-born Latinos to have fulfilled their American dream but more optimistic that they will do so someday. Foreign-born Latinos who have taken the significant step of pledging their allegiance to the United States and becoming U.S. citizens are more likely than even native-born Latinos to perceive having reached the American dream.

It remains to be seen whether recent growth in the U.S. Latino population stimulates renewal of the American dream or proves to be a short-lived

cohort effect. Still, that Latinos' assessment of their progress or prospects in achieving the American dream exceeds that of all other racial/ethnic groups does not support the fears raised by Huntington (2004a) and others that the growth of the Latino population threatens widespread allegiance to America's most deeply-cherished ideals. Research based on subsequent surveys could fruitfully revisit our findings. Examining differences among Latinos by generation and national-origin group would be particularly useful.<sup>9</sup>

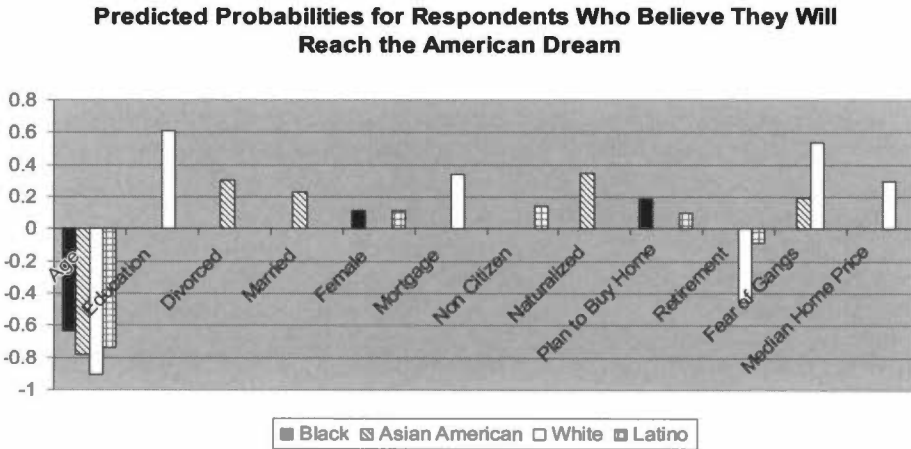
Asian Americans, the second fastest growing population in the United States, are notably pessimistic about the American dream. While Asian Americans have on average higher levels of income and education than all other racial and ethnic groups, they are significantly less likely to believe that they have achieved the American dream. Moreover, Asian Americans are largely first- and second-generation Americans. Thus, we expected to observe higher levels of optimism about the American dream as we did with the Latino population. This unexpected result provides fertile ground for future scholarship. Why are Asian Americans, a group that includes a large immigrant population and is often considered the model minority in the United States, less likely to believe that they have achieved the American dream?

One possible explanation for this unexpected result could lie in socialization that takes place in Asian-American families. According to some scholars, those in the second and third generation often encounter pressure from their parents to never be satisfied with their socioeconomic standing (Goyette and Xie, 1999; Peng and Wright, 1994), and this could prime Asian Americans to feel they have not achieved their full potential regardless of their material accomplishments. Another possibility is that like middle-class blacks, Asian Americans perceive that their opportunities for success are constrained by a glass ceiling (Woo, 1994).<sup>10</sup> The reasons why Asian Americans are less apt to believe that they have achieved the American dream poses an interesting paradox we leave to future researchers to unravel.

Like Hochschild (1995), we find that despite the objective gains blacks as a group have made in the United States, they remain the least likely to believe that they have achieved the American dream. Among our most troubling findings is that blacks remain less likely than whites to believe they have reached the American dream. Of even greater concern, younger blacks are less optimistic about their prospects than other racial or ethnic groups. Given parents' role in transmitting societal values to their children, it is also disheartening that blacks with children tend to be more pessimistic about the American dream.

<sup>9</sup> Our data do not allow us to examine generation effects; however, Table D in the Supplemental Appendix shows that even when considering only native-born residents (second generation and beyond), Latinos are still more likely than whites to believe they have achieved the American dream.

<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, our data do not allow us to measure perceptions of social and economic opportunities in the United States. We hope that future studies address this shortcoming.



**Fig. 3.** Predicted probabilities for respondents who believe they will achieve the American dream if they have not already by racial and ethnic group. *Notes:* Min-max are predicted probabilities in which all other independent variables are held at the mean and the change in the dependent variable is measured by taking the difference when the independent variable of interest is changing it from its minimum value to its maximum.

Some comfort may be derived from the fact that blacks are no more discouraged about their future prospects than are whites. In contrast to Hochschild (1995), moreover, we find more affluent blacks and those who own their own homes possess considerably rosier views of their achievements than do less well-off blacks. These results suggest that if blacks continue to realize material success, they may eventually be as likely as whites to believe that they have achieved the American dream.

Notwithstanding significant differences in racial and ethnic groups' satisfaction regarding their achievements, we find that members of all racial and ethnic groups are equally optimistic that they will achieve the American dream in the future, controlling for several factors. This general optimism reveals that the American dream continues to exert a powerful hold in the American imagination, regardless of color or hue. Moreover, our results suggest that population diversity in the United States, driven most recently by the arrival of immigrants from Asia and Latin America and their native-born children, could renew rather than diminish widespread allegiance to the ideology of the American dream.

This is not to suggest that all is well. Those who fret about the size of their nest eggs could be the canaries in the coal mine. Individuals who feared about their economic future were universally less likely to believe that they have achieved the American dream. Moreover, homeownership's strong role in promoting faith in the American dream may prove to be a double-edged sword if the widespread equity declines, defaults, and foreclosures that began around the time pollsters were fielding the Los Angeles survey continue. The ramifications could be particularly serious for Latinos and blacks, the groups

most likely to lose their homes when the housing bubble collapsed (Ojeda et al., 2009).

We are encouraged, though, that neither immigration nor the growing racial and ethnic diversity of the United States seem sufficient to erode the American dream. Our results suggest that all Angelinos, regardless of their race or class, are equally optimistic about one day achieving success in the United States. Although Los Angeles represents a leading front of the economic crisis, our findings from this city indicate the nation's strongest asset—an optimistic population—for now remains firmly intact.

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