



*Honors 2060: American Identities*

*Spring 2025*

This research investigates America's complex, multi-layered identity structure shaped by cultural traditions, historical forces, and individual values. Using the *American Creed* framework, the study explores how diverse components influence personal and collective perceptions of American identity. Through qualitative analysis of survey responses from participants of varied background, the study examines key themes including the historical development of identity, cultural heritage, social diversity, generational perspectives. The American Dream, and the impact of recent political movements. Most participants described American identity as dynamic, continuously shaped by cultural, political, and generational change; though some maintained that its roots lie in national pride and historical tradition. Dual-heritage respondents emphasized a blending of cultural customs and American values. While many participants embraced a "mosaic" model of identity over the traditions "melting pot", others expressed concern that diversity could lead to division, particularly in politically polarized contexts. Views on the **American Dream** were mixed, with many citing systemic inequality and unrest as barriers to access. Movements like **Black Lives Matter** and LGBTQ+ rights advocacy were seen by some as steps toward justice and inclusivity, while others viewed them as a source of national tension. Overall, the findings demonstrate that American identity is not fixed, by an evolving process driven by lived experience, societal change, and cultural memory.

It started quiet. Just me, asking questions, hoping someone would answer. I collected responses manually through in-person interviews and voice chats. By mid-semester, I had only 60 replies. Most were hesitant. Some left questions blank. People didn't always know how to talk about identity, especially when that identity has always been questioned. Then I posted the survey to Reddit. It went viral. Over 16,000 people responded. The responses came from across the United States, from the West Coast to the Midwest to the South. Then the reach extended further. I saw comments from people outside the country. They spoke English. They understood the questions. And they had something to say. They wrote about how American politics, media, and culture impacted them from afar. So, I adapted. I added conditional logic to the form. If someone said they lived outside the U.S., they were redirected to an international version of the survey. It asked not what it meant to be American, but what America looks like when it casts its shadow across borders. I read every single response. Reflections. Rants. Pain. Clarity. These weren't survey answers. They were confessions. Many respondents identified as White and first-generation Americans. Some didn't live in the U.S. at all. When asked about political affiliation, many wrote in "left" or "leftist." Others chose to leave the question blank. The silence itself felt deliberate. This was never just a form. It became a record. A release. A place where people finally said what no one ever asked them. I read every single response. Reflections. Rants. Pain. Clarity. These weren't survey answers. They were confessions. Some were short, others spanned paragraphs. Many come from people who didn't even live in the U.S. but still felt affected by it. And that's what this survey captured, not just how people define American identity from within, but how the identity and influence of America are seen, questioned, and critiqued far beyond borders. This wasn't just national data. This was global recognition, that the ideas and issues tied to American identity are no longer just America's to claim.

American identity, a phrase? A nationality? A status? A label tied to citizenship, democracy, and freedom. In practice, identity in the United States functions more like a performance, shaped by race, language, appearance, and personal history. Everyone has a right to their opinion, but that opinion often clashes with the image of the “proud American,” especially for those of us who didn’t choose this. We were born here, but not always raised with the American accent, the American manners, or the cultural familiarity that earns silent approval. That’s when the comments start — “You don’t look American.” (Whatever that means), a phrase meant to categorize, not question, and one that reveals how easily nationality is mistaken for appearance. It becomes clear when you fit the version of “American” they were taught to accept. Even when citizenship is printed on a legal form. Identity is still something that must be proven, because in this country, being here doesn’t always mean you’re seen as part of here. This study explores public perceptions of what it means to be a “true American,” and whether the idea of the American Dream still holds relevance. It asks: How do personal and collective histories influence identity? And how do cultural, social, and political forces shape the way people define who gets to belong in this country?

*Do you know what it means to be a “true American,” or are you just repeating what you were told?*

Out of 16,483 responses, 50.8 percent came from individuals living in the United States, while 49.2 percent came from outside its borders. The survey was designed for domestic perspectives, but the global turnout reshaped its scope. American identity was not just being lived, but the global turnout reshaped its scope. American identity was not just being lived here. It was being monitored, interpreted, and deconstructed from afar. Respondents were predominantly between the ages of 18 and 35. More than 99 percent identified as first-generation Americans. Most marked “White” for race. Political affiliation was the most avoided question across the dataset. Among those who answered, a clear pattern emerged: an overwhelming lean toward leftist, progressive, or anti-establishment positions. Not a single respondent self-identified as conservative. That absence became a presence. Patterns of omission appeared across multiple categories. Some participants skipped race. Others declined to state gender. A portion submitted partial responses. This wasn’t noise. It was refusal, data that speaks by withdrawing. Although the volume of responses was high, the content often revealed a different pattern: repetition. Many participants restated the question itself or echoed textbook definitions of American identity and the American Dream. These responses felt less like a reflection and more like recitation, answers shaped by what people were told to believe, not what they actually believed. While some respondents repeated traditional language about freedom and opportunity, many did so in many ways that it felt distanced. As if citing rather than claiming. Beneath standardized phrasing, contradictions surfaced: identity without belonging, inclusion without conviction, patriotism without proof. The dataset does not suggest a unified national self-image. What it reflects instead is fragmentation, across borders, ideologies, and personal histories.

This Project was guided by two central questions:

1) In what ways do personal and collective histories influence the formation of American identity?

2) How do cultural, social, and political forces shape individuals' perceptions of what it means to be American?

Our responses revealed that identity is often inherited before it is understood. Many participants repeated familiar definitions of American identity: freedom, opportunity, democracy. But their phrasing often felt rehearsed. Ideals were cited more often than they were lived. Some respondents framed identity as a personal experience shaped by family, community, and early education. Yet others, particularly younger participants, revealed a critical gap between the version of American they were taught to believe in and the realities they have yet to fully encounter. One 13-17-year-old respondent from Iowa described American identity as having the “freedom to do as I please (mostly)” and a responsibility to vote and stand up against injustice. Her answer was thoughtful but idealistic, shaped more by socialization than by experience. At her age, and with her racial and geographic positioning, she had not yet faced the structural barriers or contradictions described by older and more marginalized participants. Political self-identification exposed even a deeper fractures. The complete absence of conservative self-labeling, and the heavy use of terms like “leftist” or “no faith in the system,” reflected disengagement not from politics, but from the legitimacy itself. Refusal to answer political questions was its own form of protest, an exhaustion with the frameworks that claim to represent identity but fail to protect. Some respondents challenged the very premise of defining American identity at all. As one participant noted, “I don’t believe any portion of humanity (and particularly notable pluralistic American humanity) is consistent enough in the way they think about things, even within a single instant, for this question to have a real answer.” Identity, for them, was not stable or nameable, it was shifting, fractured, and often contradictory by nature. Other responses attempted to preserve a traditional narrative. A retired veteran from Michigan framed his personal homeownership in his 40s as proof that the American Dream still exists. He argued that narratives about the Dream’s death were manufactured to stoke dissatisfaction. Yet his success story: grounded in military benefits, relative economic stability, and systemic access. Contrasted sharply with the thousands who described systemic barriers to housing, healthcare, and opportunity. His story was real, but it was not representative. In contrast, some participants offered a more dynamic view. One respondent emphasized that American identity must evolve, pointing out the waves of immigration, civil rights movements, and shifting cultural norms continually reshape the meaning of “American.” This perspective reframed identity not as a fixed artifact to be preserved, but as a living process, one still struggling toward the ideas of freedom, equality, and justice, rather than clinging to a mythology of the past. Other voices pushed the boundaries of individualism even further. A 35+ year-old genderfluid, multi-ethnic respondent described American identity as whatever a person chooses it to be, independent of structures or histories. While this hyper-individualistic view reflects deeply American values of autonomy and self-definition, it also risks erasing the systemic forces of racism, poverty, exclusion, that limit choice for many. Identity, in this framing, becomes self-authored and abstract, detached from collective struggle or inherited constraint. Legal structures also surfaced as defining features of American identity. Participants noted how contracts, terms, waivers, and agreements dominate every life, not to protect individuals, but to shield institutions from liability. Suing is not viewed as betrayal of American values, but increasingly as a necessary survival tool. Protection is not granted by belonging; it is negotiated through paperwork. Identity, here, is not citizenship, it is the ability to read the fine print. Finally, international respondents exposed how American identity appears from the outside. One German participant dismantled the myth of America as a land of freedom and opportunity. He described a country where access to rights depends heavily on wealth, and where systemic racism persists even amid narratives of diversity. He argued that the American Dream was always a myth for most, designed to keep working class chasing an unattainable goal. When asked why fewer people choose America as their destination today, he listed the reasons plainly: better healthcare elsewhere, lower costs of living, better work-life balance, less risk of being shot or robbed, and governments less openly racist, misogynistic, or authoritarian. His reflection echoed official travel warnings issued by foreign governments about the dangers of visiting the U.S. For him, American identity was not something to aspire toward. It was something to navigate around. Ultimately, the findings reveal that American identity is not a shared experience. It was a negotiation. A pressure point. A myth sustained; a reality contested. It is inherited by some, rejected by others, and now watched globally with skepticism, caution, and exhaustion. It does not belong solely to those who live within U.S. borders. It belongs to the world that must deal with its consequences.



Our proudest exports, shaped my ambition and denial.

- Guns shipped faster than books
- Dreams financed through debt
- Reality TV addiction
- *Keeping up with the Kardashians*
- Mascots smiling through corporate decay
- Credit cards disguised as opportunity
- Gas station cuisine marketed as culture
- Health crises monetized before they are solved
- Billionaires' packages as self-made myths
- Patriotism refreshed every election cycle
- Bootstraps sold separately – non-refundable, no warranty
- **Freedom (terms and conditions apply)**
- White American “Edgars” still convinced they’re underdogs

ALL EXPORT SALES FINAL. REQUESTS FOR A MANAGER DENIED. AMERICA FOR SALE

 **Dan\_Dan\_III** • 7d ago

Used to be the Malbro Man until he died of cancer.

## Iconic Commercials, Hollowed Culture

American generations grew up on commercials they believe in. The Marlboro Man sold independence; he died of cancer.

Flo from Progressive sells insurance she probably doesn't carry herself, but she gets paid to smile about it. Sofia Vergara sells Pepsi in a bikini to a country drowning in diabetes.

Culture isn't passed down anymore. Its marketed, copyrighted, and sold back to the people who forgot what they were missing.

Warning: Product may contain traces of broken promises, predatory capitalism, and artificially flavored patriotism.

 **Galacticwave98** • 6d ago

Ever heard of the Pillsbury Doughboy? That

## REFERENCES:

- Survey responses collected Spring 2025, Salt Lake Community College, Honors 2060: American Identities. Google Form submissions (domestic and international)  
Reddit discussion threads (r/AskReddit, r/America, April 2025).  
Public memes and screenshots, cited under Fair Use for educational commentary (they're mine)