

Exploring Attitudes toward Immigration Reform among Moderate White Christian Voters in Ohio

Focus Group Findings

TO: Interested Parties

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The following memo contains the analysis of four focus groups held in the greater Columbus, Ohio, area on January 28, 2010, among politically moderate white Christian voters who attend religious services at least once or twice per month. Two groups were comprised of self-identified Protestants, and two groups were comprised of self-identified Catholics. See Appendix A for more detailed composition of the groups.

Catholic-Protestant Differences: Ellis Island vs. Home Depot

The focus groups revealed significant differences in the underlying attitudes toward immigration between Catholics and Protestants on the issue of immigration. Throughout the discussions, Catholics were generally more receptive to the idea of immigration reform, held more positive associations with the general idea of immigration, and had more empathic attitudes toward immigrants than Protestants.

For example, each group began with a “top of mind” question that asked participants to write down the first images or feelings that came to them when they heard the word “immigration.” The differences between Catholic and Protestant initial associations were striking (see Appendix B for a full table of responses). Among Catholics, 11 of these initial associations were positive, 5 were negative, and 4 were neutral. Among Protestants, only 4 were positive, fully 14 were negative, and 1 was neutral.

The positive Catholic responses were closely linked to their own families’ immigration stories, their familiarity with and positive experiences with their own ethnic neighborhoods, and other experiences that generated a certain affinity to contemporary immigrants traveling to the United States. The following comment is representative of this sentiment among Catholic participants:

My father came in through Ellis Island and his father came and worked on the railroad and basically saved enough money for the rest of the family to come over so they could have a better life here in America (Catholic participant).

These experiences also generated a stronger sense of solidarity among Catholics and empathy for the immigrant experience.

If you think about the turn of the century when everybody was coming from everywhere and we were just a country of immigrants and trying to think about, you know, all the different languages, I mean, it took a lot of effort and it took a lot of humanitarian and it took a lot of volunteer work to help all of us, all of our, our parents and grandparents, your grandparents, my great-grandparents (Catholic participant).

If Catholics held quick associations with Ellis Island and their ancestors' immigration experience, Protestants were much more likely to draw distinctions between "them" and "us," and to conjure negative images of illegal immigration. This view was represented by one participant who thought of "Home Depot," where he imagined many undocumented immigrants congregated to find day-labor work.

For some reason Home Depot popped to mind (laughter). If you go to the Home Depot, you see there's a lot of people there, a lot of contractors and stuff who are immigrants. And sometimes there will be people outside that you can hire for various jobs under the table (Protestant male).

Protestants were much more likely to associate illegal immigration, border crossing, security concerns, and law enforcement with the word "immigration." Throughout the discussions, the overall tone among the Protestants was decidedly more negative. The following are representative of Protestant responses:

I just don't like people coming into the USA illegally. I really don't like it, and I don't like the way that they do it. You know, they build caves underground from Mexico like to California. I think that's nuts (Protestant participant).

I guess, what I thought about was a lot of the problems with the illegals that have come over, not so much with the many people who have come over legally, but with the illegals and some of the awful stories that have made national news about they bring them over in the backs of trucks with 50 people crammed into 10 square feet. I'm exaggerating, but that kind of thing. So unfortunately, mostly negative (Protestant participant).

One caveat is worth noting, however, about the generally more positive Catholic responses. Some Catholic participants were quick to draw a distinction between their own immigrant ancestors, who "did it right," and current undocumented immigrants who are breaking the law. The following quote, which was echoed by others, captures this sentiment:

My grandparents immigrated here from Poland, but they did it the right way. They learned the language; they earned their own way.

The Immigration System: “Broken” but Unsure How

Participants in all four focus groups seemed to agree that the immigration system was broken, although they had difficulty pinpointing the exact root of the problem. Most participants, among both Catholics and Protestants felt that the immigration system was too complex, and too expensive. The following quote captures this sentiment, which was widespread.

I think we make it so doggone hard.... I don't know that, but if you're coming here illegally, it's probably because you're frustrated from where you are and you don't want to wait through the system because the system is too long, too involved and too expensive.... There's got to be an easier way, an easier system, a more organized way to do it, other than what we have now (Catholic female).

It was notable that when a few participants talked about their own experiences and frustrations with the contemporary immigration system, these stories carried a lot of weight with other participants. Most were willing to take these stories at face value in the absence of much concrete information of their own. For example, the following stories were both influential and referenced by others in the groups during subsequent parts of the discussion.

I can tell you my son married a Japanese girl and the stuff they went through to get her here and get a green-- I mean, it was unbelievable the amount of money it cost and everything. It was-- I mean, she was, you know, a Japanese citizen, a college educated girl and everything and it was terrible (Catholic male).

I work for an engineering firm and so we do have a lot of people that are from out of the country try to come in and work for us. And when they are trying to do it the legal way, it's a very painful process. It takes many, many months for them to be able to come in and actually work for us. Lots of paperwork, and a lot of times it's just back and forth (Protestant female).

Especially in light of these stories, a number of participants believed that making the system simpler, less expensive, and easier to navigate would cut down on the number of immigrants entering the country illegally. However, some participants were not convinced that today's undocumented immigrants wanted to do much other than “get by” in order to reap some of the benefits while avoiding responsibilities such as paying taxes.

Significantly, during the course of the discussions, a number of participants began to reflect on their own lack of knowledge about our immigration system and that their previous opinions had outrun their knowledge. This realization, especially among those

with more negative views of immigration reform, led to a greater willingness among participants to rethink their position. One respondent summed up her feelings as follows:

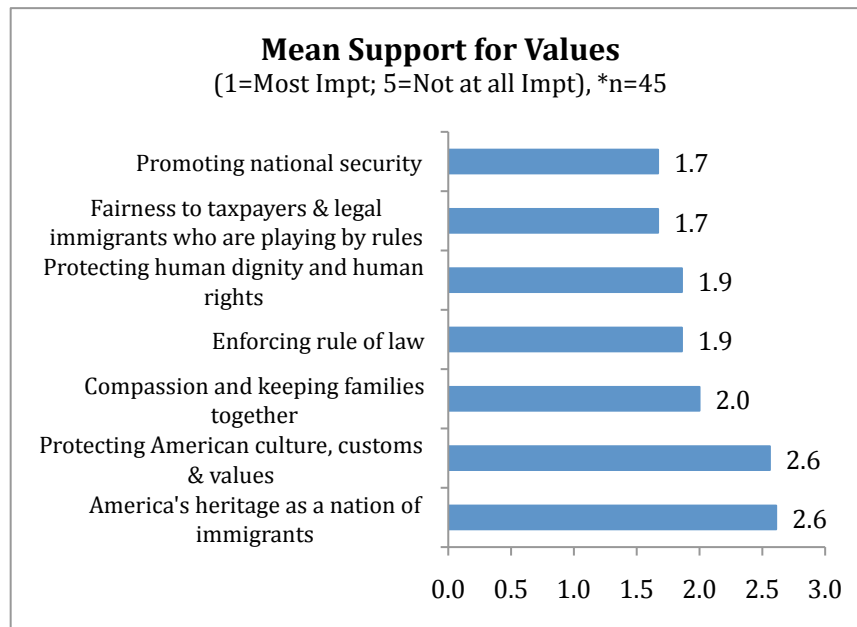
Well, I'm sitting here and I'm listening to different people that have had contact with different things and I'm realizing how much I don't know. How much does it cost to get into this country? Is that the reason why there are so many illegals? (Catholic female).

After the session, another respondent said that before the session he thought he could write immigration reform legislation in an afternoon, but that after talking through the issue for an hour and half he “wouldn't touch it with a 10-foot pole” because of the complexity.

Religion and Values: Linking the Moral and the Practical

Prominent Religious and Moral Values

Generally, participants responded positively to a list of religious and moral values that could underwrite immigration reform policy. Overall, the average ranking for 5 of 7 values among participants was as at least “very important” for immigration reform, indicating that most participants felt they were relevant values in the debate about immigration reform (see Appendix C for full list of values and responses): promoting national security; fairness to taxpayers and legal immigrants who are playing by the rules; protecting human dignity and human rights; enforcing the rule of law; and compassion and keeping families together. Two values—protecting American culture, customs and values; and America's heritage as a nation of immigrants—had an average ranking that was considerably lower as guides to thinking about immigration reform.



There were a few notable differences between Catholic and Protestant participants in terms of the values they connected to immigration reform. Catholics were more likely than Protestants to cite protecting human dignity and human rights as a very important value (mean = 1.7 vs. 2.1 respectively). Catholics also included “America’s heritage as a nation of immigrants” as a very important value, whereas Protestants did not (mean = 2.2 vs. 3.1 respectively).

I said also protecting human dignity and human rights. I mean, even though these people might have committed crimes by coming to this country, they’re still people and they should be treated as such. That’s just a core kind of belief of mine (Catholic female).

Protestants, on the other hand, ranked “protecting national security” as the highest value and ranked other values like fairness to taxpayers and enforcing the rule of law higher than values like human dignity and compassion. Notably, among these groups of moderate religious voters, the value of “compassion and keeping families together,” ranked fifth out of the five most important values in both the Catholic and Protestant groups.

In the Catholic groups, but nearly absent in the Protestant groups, the values of “love of neighbor” and “welcoming everyone” were mentioned as guiding values relevant to immigration reform. Participants, however, most readily connected these values as guides to actions they or their churches could take, rather than as guides for policy.

*Male: One of the greatest commands from the church, I guess, is to love thy neighbor as thyself, so that’s kind of hard to—
Female: And many parishes will now help a lot of illegal immigrants become legal. They really do (Catholic group).*

Struggles to Link the Moral to the Practical: Sharing the Spaghetti or Following the Laws

Across all groups, participants struggled somewhat to link their faith to the issue of immigration reform. The following barriers emerged: 1) participants said that immigration does not have the immediacy or carry the moral urgency of some other issues; 2) participants drew a distinction between the personal and political, locating religion in the former and immigration in the latter; 3) participants struggled to connect the idealism of their faith with the hard necessities and realism of crafting government policy.

Especially in the Catholic groups, participants compared immigration reform to other political issues such as abortion, which many saw as more strongly connected to their faith and much closer at hand. One participant described abortion as “over here” and immigration reform as “somewhere over there.” Another put it this way:

Abortion is very emotional. It's very sensational. The photos are very emotional, and it's very in your face as opposed to immigration. It's easy just to turn your head and pretend like immigration problems don't exist (Catholic female).

One exception to the perceived distance of immigration problems was heard among participants who held jobs in certain fields, such as education, which put them in closer contact with local immigrant populations. For example, Columbus, Ohio, has a sizable Somali immigrant population. Many participants' views were informed by their own experiences with or perceptions of Somali immigrants at the local level. Connecting national policies to these local experiences is important for helping these moderate religious voters grasp the relevance of immigration reform to their lives.

Many participants also perceived immigration reform to be at some distance from their faith and values because they drew a distinction between the personal and the political. Participants also separated immigrants (people) and immigration (a government policy). Religion for many was most applicable to the personal realm, while the policy realm was governed more by rules and practical limitations.

I think religion applies more on like a personal level, but like this immigration, it's [on] a national level. You can't apply religion to that (Catholic male).

I mean, morally yes, you're supposed to be good to other people, but that's on a person-to-person basis. Like she was saying, her father invited everybody in for spaghetti. Well, that's cool because that was her dad, that wasn't the government saying, "Here, take all of our spaghetti." And that's what we're doing (Catholic female).

When participants identified a value such as "compassion and keeping families together" that they thought was important to immigration reform, many had difficulty applying this value to the practicalities of policy decisions. Moreover, they were skeptical of hearing clergy talk in a way that emphasized altruism and ignored the practical problems.

I was trying to think in terms of like what the government could actually impose as law. I'm sure religion would just be like, "Tear down the walls and just invite them all;" be like, "We've got plenty of jobs for you," and stuff like that, [related to the value of] compassion. But it probably isn't going to be as practical [as it needs to be] (Protestant male).

Male: I think the one sermon I heard, he made a couple allusions to illegal immigrants. And again, it was the altruistic side of things. And I agree with you about altruism. It's a great word. It's ideal.

Female: But does it make sense in the natural world? No, it doesn't (Protestant group).

One exchange in the Catholic group garnered much agreement in the group and captured a thread that ran through all of the groups—that participants were looking for a combination of values like compassion and love of neighbor on the one hand and respect for the rule of law on the other.

Female 1: It's easy for us to sit around and blame the ills of society on a group of people who come from a different place and speak differently and look differently.... So I just want us to embrace our Catholicism and embrace what God put us on this earth to do is to love our neighbor and, you know, to help them.

Female 2: Well, you have to love your neighbor, but everybody still needs to follow the laws. I mean, the Bible started out with laws. God has always made laws.... We're just trying to make them follow rules.

Churches and Clergy: Few Hearing about Immigration in Church

Relatively few participants reported hearing about the issue of immigration in church, and among those who did, most reported the issue had come up primarily in casual conversations among fellow congregants. Most participants reported that they would be wary of their religious leader preaching on the subject from the pulpit.

[I'd support hearing from the pulpit] just an opinion or something and [a message of] "welcome everybody," but if you're going to talk about the legal aspects of it and stuff like that, I wouldn't want to hear it (Catholic male).

However, participants were much more receptive to the idea of their Priest or pastor holding informational sessions or leading educational discussion groups.

I think a discussion group offers opportunity for people to have one-on-one discussion with a priest. It's a lot easier than someone standing up at the pulpit, because, you know, when they stand at the pulpit we sit there and we listen as if they know everything and they're the expert. And I think an open discussion on immigration, to me, would be more beneficial (Catholic female).

None of the participants were aware of the official position of their denomination on immigration reform. Given the complexity of the issue, many participants were also unsure of what the official position could possibly be.

I think of abortion and there's a clear stance for "the Catholic Church says this," but has the Catholic Church ever even pronounced sort of a stance on immigration? I don't know what it would be (Catholic female).

Most participants agreed that they would seriously consider both what their denomination or local clergy member had to say on the subject, although all who addressed this topic reported that denominational or clergy positions would not be determinative of their own positions. Many participants in the Protestant groups also

emphasized that the influence of their pastor was directly related to their personal relationship with the pastor.

Immigration Reform Policy: Supportive but Skeptical about Feasibility

Participants were asked to gauge their support for an immigration reform package that included five basic components: 1) requirements for undocumented immigrants (pass background checks, register with the federal government, study English, pay fines and taxes, and work towards full citizenship); 2) reuniting families; 3) cracking down on unscrupulous employers who hire undocumented workers; 4) ensuring professional border enforcement; and 5) treating immigrant detainees humanely and fairly (see Appendix D for exact wording).

Participants were generally very receptive to the immigration reform package as a whole, with many expressing some relief at seeing a set of finite policies that addressed the major parts of the problem. Although participants were largely supportive of the package as a whole, two reservations surfaced. First, some participants, predominately but not exclusively women, raised concerns about requiring undocumented immigrants to pay a fine, primarily because they recognized undocumented immigrants were already under considerable financial strain, and therefore a fine might prove to be a disincentive for pursuing legal status.

Female: I still don't know about paying a fine. I just think that would be discouraging...

Female: But they're not saying how much the fine is. It could be \$25.

Male: And they're breaking the law. It's just like speeding.

Female: They're coming here to escape oppression, so come on.

Male: Well, that's true, but you can't let every Tom, Dick and Harry come in and do it. I mean, that's—

Female: I just think a fine is wrong when they're going to do everything else. They should find them a shelter, somewhere to stay, should teach them the things that they need to do (Catholic group).

Second, many participants were skeptical that various aspects of the package might be difficult or even impossible to implement.

On studying English:

Yes, but you know what, if you give people a test to learn English, there's going to be a lot of people that speak English that can't pass the test either, and what do you do with them? (Protestant male).

On border enforcement:

"Ensuring smart professional border enforcement"--I'm sure you'd like to do that, but how are you going to do it? (Protestant male).

On the meeting requirements for citizenship:

I don't think the first part is realistic because you don't have a cutoff date. Now, are you encouraging people to come in illegally and then they can get legal, or do you say okay, everybody that's here now can do that and from this date forward anybody illegal will be shipped back? I mean, this is awfully ambiguous and wouldn't work the way it is (Catholic male).

Finally, a participant on one of the Protestant groups suggested that he would be more receptive to hearing policy ideas related to the rule of law and national security first, and then hearing how these policies protected other values. There was widespread agreement in this group with this approach.

Male 1: All these [values] are very noble in their intent, but I take a more practical viewpoint that enforcing the rule of law and promoting national security gives us a structure within which we can create a safe environment to then pursue policies that protect these other values (Protestant male).

Male 2: I feel like the role of government is kind of like what he was talking about, to create a stable environment where we can protect people and then, you know, live life. So for me I'm interested in policies that establish fairness in a way that then people aren't going to be so worried about this life so they can be open to thinking about the next (Protestant male).

Perceptions of Immigrants' Commitment to the U.S.: "If you're going to be here, be here"

One of the central underlying sentiments that surfaced repeatedly throughout the discussion was the idea that undocumented immigrants were not committed to being in and contributing to the U.S. but were instead more interested in taking advantage of the system.

I mean, if they're trying to make it in America and they're trying to become citizens and they're trying to, you know, do right, there's no problem with it. But the ones that don't want to go for their citizenship, that don't want to pay taxes, that don't want to do anything and take jobs from those of us who do want them ... those are the people that I have a problem with (Catholic male).

Questions about commitment to the United States were common throughout the discussion. This idea about being committed to the welfare of the U.S. was an important way that some participants differentiated past immigrants from current immigrants. People believed that their grandparents and great grandparents were devoted to the U.S. and committed to becoming part of American society. There was a widespread

belief among participants that many undocumented immigrants were not so committed to putting “their whole being” into coming to the U.S.

What’s the difference from when our parents, when they came to this country? What did they have to do that’s different than what they’re doing today? I think they had to prove themselves worthy of being in our country. Today I’m not so sure that they have to put out their whole being. I think they can easily hide the reasons why they’re here (Catholic female).

Participants mentioned two pieces of evidence that supported their suspicion that undocumented immigrants lack appropriate commitment to the U.S. and are content with the status quo. First, many held the perception that undocumented immigrants are primarily interested in gaming the system in order to send all of their money back to their country of origin.

I think when you think back in the mid to late 1800s when so many people were coming over, it was to start a new life in America. I’m not sure that’s what people are-- Like you say, they’re coming over to pick tomatoes for the summer and send some money back home (Protestant female).

Second, many participants took immigrants’ willingness to speak English as a proxy for their commitment to being in the U.S. and contributing to the community.

If you’re going to come here, then speak our language.... If you want to speak that way, then go home amongst your family and speak, but I think that when you’re out in public and you want to be here in America, speak English and also work towards US citizenship. If you want to be here, be here. If you’re not sure, then go back and try to decide (Protestant female).

But if they want to live here, why don’t they want to learn English? Why don’t they want to learn our language if they want to live here? (Catholic female).

Of all the policy items, the requirement that undocumented immigrants study English elicited the most enthusiastic support.

Key Findings and Strategic Insights

1. *Catholic-Protestant differences.* Among moderate religious voters in Ohio who participated in these focus groups, Catholics held more supportive views of immigrants and were more supportive of immigration reform generally. One primary reason for this is that Catholics connect present immigration to their own families' immigration stories. However, many were also quick to differentiate between their families' stories and current immigration by noting that their families "did it right" by making a full commitment to being in the U.S.
2. *Lack of knowledge and the power of stories.* For these participants, immigration reform is an area of soft opinions in a weak information field. Participants across all groups were quick to say that they believed the current immigration system was broken, but they had little concrete knowledge of how it was broken. When participants heard stories about hardships of becoming a citizen, ideas shifted in a more supportive direction.
3. *Support for underlying values, struggles to link them to policy.* Participants across all groups ranked 5 of 7 values as very important with regard to immigration reform. Catholics were more likely than Protestants to cite human dignity and human rights as very important. Participants in all groups struggled to link these values to policy, often seeing idealism of the former in conflict with the practicality of the latter. Successful messaging will need to marry the practical with the moral, perhaps showing how the former protects the latter. If clergy only talk about religious and moral values such as compassion and keeping families together, welcoming, and love of neighbor in the absence of practical solutions, their message will fall flat.
4. *Openness to clergy leadership in the appropriate setting.* Nearly all participants were wary of hearing about a political issue such as immigration reform from the pulpit, but they were open to clergy leadership in discussion or informational settings. Very few had heard anything about immigration reform at church, and nearly all were unaware of any official position of their denomination on the issue.
5. *Concerns about commitment of contemporary immigrants to the U.S.* Moderate religious voters may need to be convinced that, given the opportunity, illegal immigrants would fully invest in a path to citizenship and "put out their whole being" into being here. These participants see the willingness to learn English both as an important policy point and as a proxy of immigrants' commitment to investing in the U.S.

Appendix A. Additional Participant Demographics

The following are some additional demographic information about focus group participants across the four groups:

- Age and gender: all groups had a balance of ages (18-65) and genders.
- Education and household income: Roughly half of the participants had less than a college education (51%), and 45% had a household income of less than \$75,000 a year.
- Political party affiliation: A plurality of participants identified as politically independent (48%), about 4-in-10 (38%) identified as Republican, and just 14% identified as Democrat.
- Vote in 2008: Participants favored John McCain over Barack Obama by a slim margin in the 2008 election (49% to 44%).

A note of caution: focus groups findings cannot be generalized to the overall population because they are based on small samples sizes and are not based on representative random samples. The findings noted here—especially the strength of values, messages and strategic insights—must be tested in a scientific quantitative study.

Appendix B. Associations with “Immigration”

At the beginning of each group, participants were asked to participate in a “top of mind” exercise, where they were asked to write down their first associations when they heard the word “immigration.” This exercise generated some important insights into Catholic-Protestant differences on immigration reform.

Associations with “Immigration” Among Catholic and Protestant Participants	
Catholic Participants	Protestant Participants
POSITIVE (Total = 11)	POSITIVE (Total = 4)
“Ellis Island”	“Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island”
“Statue of liberty, Ellis island”	“We are all immigrants of some sort”
“Legal immigration is the foundation of our country”	“One world, opportunity, freedom oppression”
“Origin of the nation”	“Diversity in the work force”
“Grandparents”	
“Grandparents, better life”	
“Thrive for a better life”	
“People coming into the U.S from other countries, looking for a better life”	
“Folks from another country, better life”	
“People coming into the country looking for a better place”	
“It’s good for the country”	

NEGATIVE (Total = 5)	NEGATIVE (Total = 14)
“Illegal”	“Close the borders, US treasury, Mexican, Muslim, Somalians
“Illegal/Non-U.S. Citizens”	“illegal, borders”
“People that don’t pay taxes”	“Border security, illegal”
“Foreigners, more people”	“illegal vs. legal”
“Humanitarian efforts, economic impact”	“People coming into USA illegally”
	“unemployment, looking for help, illegal immigration”
	Mexico, China, Illegal, Jobs, Constitution
	“unauthorized, not legal citizens, painful process
	“Broken”
	“Mexico border crossing”
	“Mexico, farm labor, foreign”
	“Slavery, exploitation, controversy, Home Depot”
	“Population density, world history”
	“Somebody outside America, law enforcement”
NEUTRAL (Total = 4)	NEUTRAL (Total = 1)
“People moving to the U.S.”	“Lawful entry of non-citizen to a country, jobs, live”
“People coming in our borders”	
“People from other countries attempting to come to America”	
“People coming to American from another country”	

Appendix C. Values Related to Immigration Reform

The following table summarizes the handout on religious and moral values related to immigration reform and participant responses.

Moral and Religious Values Related to Immigration Reform (1=The most important; 5=Not at all important)			
	Total (mean)	Catholics (mean)	Protestants (mean)
Promoting national security	1.7	1.8	1.6
Fairness to taxpayers & legal immigrants who are playing by rules	1.7	1.6	1.7
Protecting human dignity and human rights	1.9	1.7	2.1
Enforcing rule of law	1.9	1.9	1.9
Compassion and keeping families together	2.0	1.9	2.1
Protecting American culture, customs & values	2.6	2.4	2.7
America's heritage as a nation of immigrants	2.6	2.2	3.1

Appendix D. Handout on Immigration Reform Components

Real reform would address the root causes of our broken immigration system to reduce illegal immigration and restore the rule of law. A workable immigration reform package would combine the following elements:

1. Requiring those here illegally to:
 - a. Pass background checks and register with the federal government
 - b. Study English
 - c. Pay a fine and taxes
 - d. Work towards full U.S. citizenship
2. Reuniting families separated by outdated immigration laws
3. Cracking down on unscrupulous employers who hire undocumented workers and undermine their law-abiding competitors
4. Ensuring smart and professional border enforcement
5. Reforming current immigration enforcement practices, including treating immigration detainees humanely and fairly