

# **DRIVER'S LICENSE NONSENSE**

**A LOOK AT MULTILINGUAL DRIVER'S LICENSE EXAM  
POLICIES AND PUBLIC OPINION**

Copyright © 2007 by the U.S. ENGLISH Foundation, Inc.

***Driver's License Nonsense***  
**Copyright 2007 by the U.S. English Foundation, Inc.**

Copyright © 2007 by  
U.S. English Foundation, Inc.  
1747 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Suite 1050  
Washington, DC 20006

All rights reserved. No portion of this work may be reproduced without the written consent of the U.S. English Foundation, Inc. All citations of this work must credit the U.S. English Foundation, Inc. ***Driver's License Nonsense*** is published by the U.S. English Foundation as part of its mission to discuss, develop and disseminate information related to language policy in the United States.

The U.S. English Foundation is classified by the Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)(3) non-profit public policy research and education organization. Individuals, philanthropic foundations, corporations, companies, or associations are eligible to support the U.S. English Foundation through tax-deductible gifts. Nothing written herein is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of the U.S. English Foundation, its Board of Directors, or its officers, or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before the Congress or in state legislatures.

For further information on the U.S. English Foundation, please visit <http://www.usefoundation.org> or call 202-833-0100.

## **Introduction**

When an immigrant to the United States learns English, it is indisputable that there is a gain both to the individual and the government. Fluency in English provides the individual with higher earnings [1], greater opportunities in employment, education and easier access to the marketplace [2]. The government benefits from the individual's improved standing in the form of increased tax revenues and decreased need for government assistance [3].

In the case of English learning, it is in the government's best interest to see that newcomers to the United States are ascending to this goal. Any derivation from the path, such as providing forms in alternate languages, can be seen as a revenue-losing proposition. A government that offers too many programs from which there is no gain is a government destined for bankruptcy.

There are exceptions to the rejection of something-for-nothing programs. When life or limb is on the line, the American system works to mandate that nothing is lost in translation. In courtrooms and in hospitals, translators are provided for any individual unsure of his/her English fluency. In these cases, the provision of short-term translation services is aimed at protecting an individual's rights. Furthermore, translations also reduce the possibility of long-term costs, such as those for prosecuting an innocent individual, or a lengthy hospital stay brought on by an incorrect diagnosis.

Yet the provision of translations in these cases is on an as-needed basis. When translations become part of government business, rising to the level of pre-printed forms and employees dedicated to interpreting, the equation is no longer balanced. In many of these cases, the government comes out as a clear and distinct loser.

## **Driver's Licenses**

Take the example of driver's licenses. The ability to operate a motor vehicle in the United States offers independence like few other privileges. The issuance of a single card gives the individual additional freedom to change locations and jobs. Compared to using public transportation, driving reduces the time it takes to do errands, socialize and take advantage of opportunities. As the Maine Bureau of Motor Vehicles web page states, "...a driver's license means freedom, fun, and becoming an adult." [4]

While any new holder of a driver's license is ecstatic at these opportunities, they are not dispensed freely. As many states express in their driver's manuals, driving is a privilege, not a right [5, 6]. First, a license must be earned – by paying fees, presenting certain documents, and by taking a written and road test at a given location during limited hours. Second, it can be taken away for multiple reasons, including driving while intoxicated, failure to obey traffic laws, or disability. Some states, such as Florida, can revoke driver's licenses based on non-driving factors, such as school truancy and underage tobacco possession [6]. Illinois bans drivers under the age of 18 from using a wireless phone while operating a motor vehicle [7]. Massachusetts prohibits individuals from renewing their license for many reasons, including unpaid parking violations, outstanding court warrants, and unpaid child support [8].

The extension into areas unrelated to driving is notable, but not unusual. Given that driver's licenses are the area where individuals are most likely to have interaction with state government, they are frequently used to influence civic behavior and encourage community development. For example, the National Voter Registration Act, or "Motor Voter Law," allows individuals to register to vote or change their mailing address at the same time they apply for or renew their driver's licenses. Furthermore, lists of driver's license holders are one of the most commonly used sources for prospective jurors, another civic responsibility.

While some may make the claim that driver's licenses are just about driving, just as social security numbers are just about social security, the reality is the opposite. The government has long used this interaction with the general public as a way to influence personal choices and enhance society as a whole.

### **The Current State of Driver's License Exams**

When it comes to offering drivers licenses to immigrants, the laws of each state reflect the importance of international commerce, tourism and beneficial migration. To assist these visitors during their short stay or first days in America, every state already makes license exceptions for temporary residents and visitors. In most cases, a licensed driver from another country can drive legally in the state, usually with a combination of his native country's driver's license and an international driver's license. This privilege is offered to those immigrants and visitors residing in the state for a limited period of time, in some cases up to one year [10]. Most nations in the world offer a similar provision for Americans driving abroad.

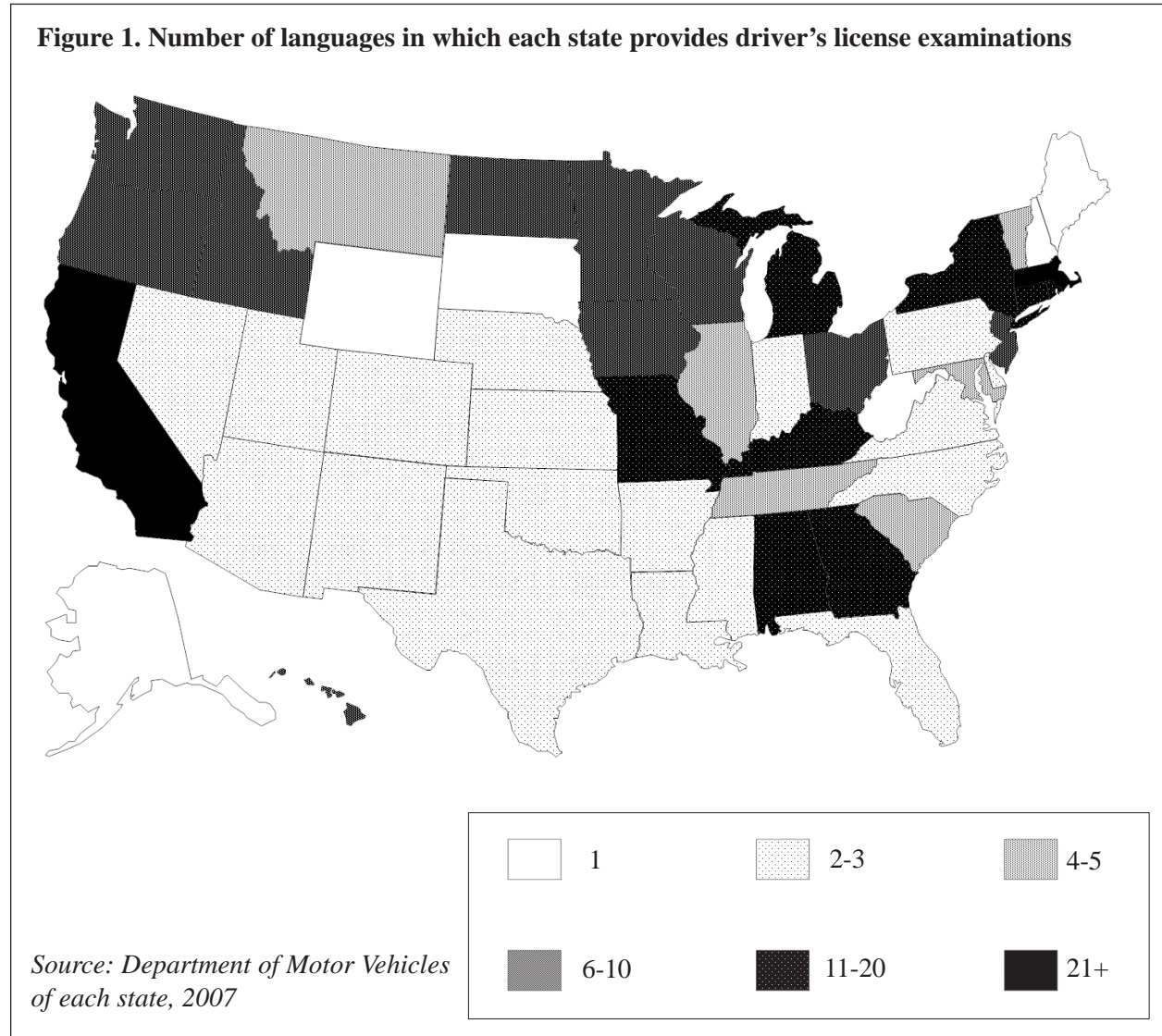
This provision alone should be enough to address concerns about immigrants needing driver's licenses to get to work, earn sufficient incomes, and take advantage of opportunities. From the time a newcomers steps foot on American soil, the state government acknowledges, "If your country proclaims you fit to drive, we proclaim you fit to drive." However, the law also clearly declares that the newcomer has a certain amount of time to get a license from the state, a span during which the individual is expected to assimilate into American society.

If the individual comes to the United States with no driver's license from his native country, he is in the same situation as an American getting a license for the first time. In neither case does the government offer special assistance to license seekers.

However, in the case of languages, state governments generally provide help. Even with the existing policy for immigrants on the books, 45 of the 50 states and the District of Columbia offer driver's license exams in languages other than English [9]. Most often, these exams are given in Spanish, although exams are also offered in Tongan, Hmong and Bosnian, just to name a few. Furthermore, once states break open the multilingual gates, they often become wholesale translation machines. The average number of languages for driver's license exams in states that offer the test in more than one language is 7.2 [9].

Contrary to popular belief, the provision of multilingual driver’s license exams has little to do with the size or demographic breakdown of immigrants. As shown in figure 1, Texas and Florida, two states with high immigrant populations, offer very few choices in languages for driver’s licenses. Meanwhile, states with small immigrant populations, such as North Dakota, Idaho, Alabama, South Carolina and Kentucky offer license exams in up to 20 languages.

**Figure 1. Number of languages in which each state provides driver’s license examinations**



When the chosen languages are examined, they also defy a common sense explanation. Idaho, home to just 1,115 Russian speakers according to Census 2000 [10], offers the exam in Russian, but Florida, with 19,730 Russian speakers, does not. Montana offers a driver’s license exam in Chinese for the 435 Chinese speakers in the state, but provides no native language exam for the 3,285 French speakers, 915 Norwegian speakers or 710 Japanese speakers. In North Dakota, where the driver’s license exam is offered in seven languages, four of the languages in which the exam is offered have fewer than 500 speakers statewide. Meanwhile, New York offers driver’s license ex-

ams in 12 languages, but still excludes more than a dozen languages which have over 10,000 speakers within the state, including Yiddish (113,515 speakers), Tagalog (65,505 speakers), and Turkish (16,445 speakers). Some of the languages, and the states which offer driver’s license exams in them, is given in figure 2 and appendix A.



### A New Option

Providing driver’s licenses in languages other than English appears to go against the normal manner of government operation. To determine how Americans feel about this practice, we contracted with Zogby International to poll Americans regarding whether seekers of a drivers license in the United States should be expected to demonstrate English proficiency. Respondents were given two traditional choices: driver’s license exams should be offered in multiple languages, or driver’s license exams should be offered only in English. A third option, one new to the debate on driver’s license exams in foreign languages, was also added: driver’s license exams should be offered in multiple languages, but license renewal should require than an exam be taken in English.

While the two responses on the extremes – only in English or in multiple languages, would be familiar to many respondents, the reply in the middle might seem unfamiliar at first. However, the policy of “graduated” privileges is not foreign to driver’s licenses. In fact, most states already have such a policy in effect for another class of new drivers – the young.

In many states, those receiving a license for the first time are often subject to additional regulations, including limitations on when they can drive and how many infractions they can incur. For example, New York State does not permit Junior License Holders, those under the age of 18 (or 17 with a completed driver’s education course), are not permitted to drive in New York City, and have restrictions on driving between 9 p.m. and 5 a.m. [11]. In Kansas, where an individual can obtain a restricted driver’s license at age 15, the driving privilege can only be exercised going to and from school, to and from work, or when accompanied by an licensed adult. Full driving privileges are not earned until the age of 16 [12].

The idea that government services are earned, not merely given, corresponds with other government programs which reward effort with benefits. Unemployment benefits, for example, require

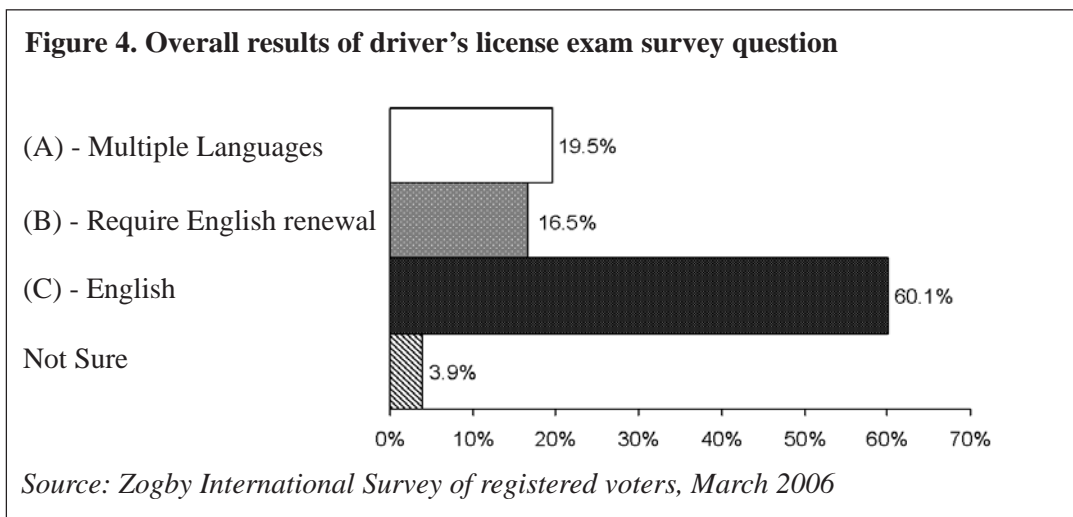
that an applicant continue actively seeking employment in order to continue receiving support. If the person does not demonstrate effort, or exceeds a certain period of time, these benefits are terminated. The welfare reform efforts in the 1990s accomplished the same purposes with those support payments. In our study, the middle choice goes along with those ideals – “we will help you temporarily, *but only while you are taking steps to improve.*”

### Survey Results

According to the results of our survey, the majority of Americans are opposed to offering driver’s license exams in languages other than English. More than six-in-ten respondents said that English should be the sole language of licensing tests, and another 16 percent said that all renewal license tests should be given solely in English. In all, more than three-in-four of those surveyed believed that English proficiency was a necessary requirement for a lifetime behind the wheel. The question is given in figure 3, with the results of the survey in figure 4.

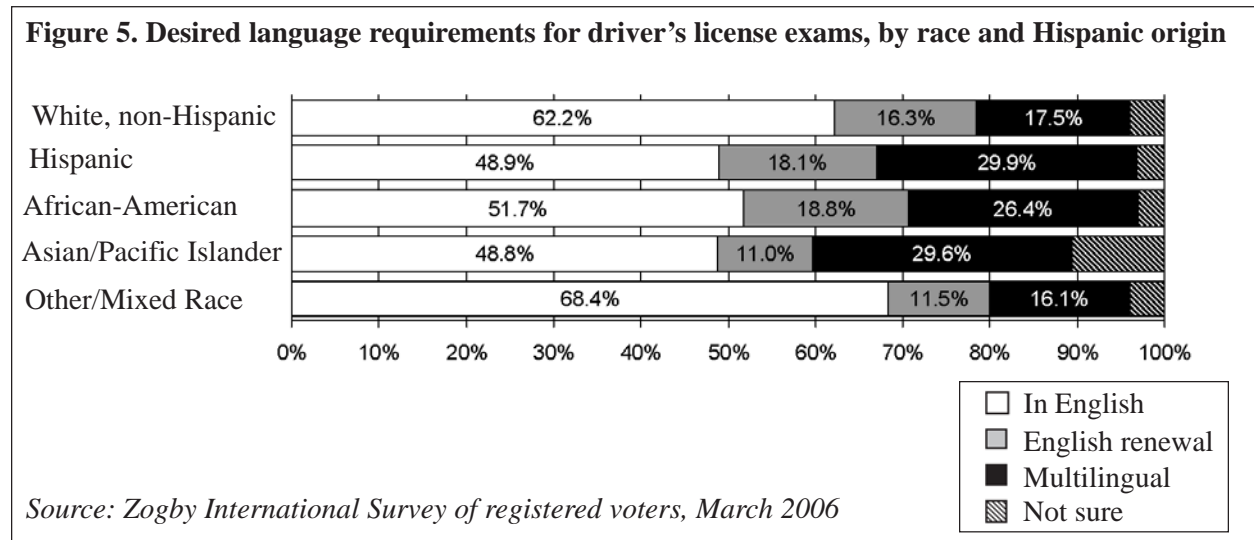
**Figure 3. Survey Question**  
Which one of the following most closely matches your views - A, B, or C?

- A. Driver’s license exams should be offered in multiple languages.
- B. Driver’s license exams should be offered in multiple languages, but license renewal should require that an exam be taken in English.
- C. Driver’s license exams should be offered only in English.



Some might say that the strong support for requiring English proficiency for driver’s license exams would be influenced by personal experience. After all, it is quite possible that nearly all of the respondents to the survey took their driver’s license exam in English, and believe that what was good for them should be good for others. To examine whether the belief that driver’s license exams should be conducted in English was a product of ethnic lines, we examined the responses of whites, Hispanics, African-Americans, and other ethnic groups.

Our analysis found that while non-whites are more likely than whites to favor driver’s license exams in languages other than English, many more favor having the exam in English. In the case of Hispanics, African-Americans and Asian/Pacific Islanders, roughly half believe that the exam should only be in English, and another 11-18 percent believed that an English exam should be required for license renewal. Fewer than one-third of the members of each group favored having driver’s license exams in multiple languages in perpetuity. The results are given in figure 5.



While it might be expected that non-whites should be more likely to desire driver’s licenses exams in languages other than English, the fact that the mixed race/other race was most opposed to driver’s license exams in other languages illustrates that the immigrant population is not homogenous in the desire for multilingualism. The strong desire of those of other race/mixed race to have driver’s license exams solely in English may be a product of their own familial melting pot or lower likelihood that government services were available in their parents’ native language.

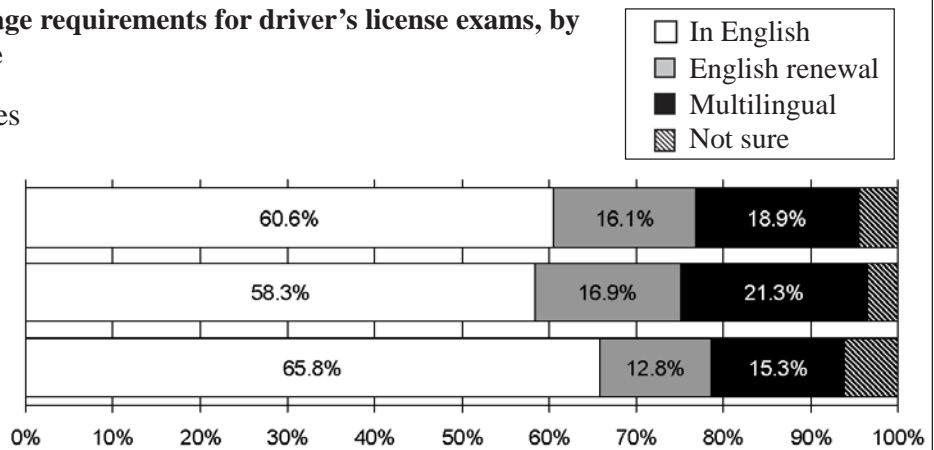
Upon closer examination, the slightly stronger support for multilingual driver’s license exams among certain ethnic groups appeared to have little to do with recent immigration to the United States. When the results are weighed against parent’s native language or languages, the support more closely mirrors that of whites than of immigrant groups. In fact, in cases where the respondents parents had different native languages, the results were nearly identical to the overall population. These survey results are shown in figures 6 and 7.

Many opinion leaders have suggested that those who live in an environment where there is little pressure to learn English take longer to do so. This combination of exposure and resistance is evident in the data above. For respondents whose parents did not have English as their native language, but who shared the same native language, more than 21 percent favored multilingual driver’s license exams.



**Figure 6. Desired language requirements for driver’s license exams, by parents’ native language**

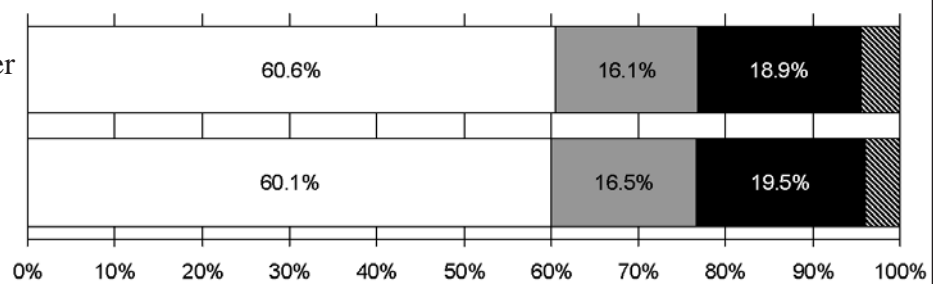
Parents’ native languages were...



**Figure 7. Desired language requirements for driver’s license exams, overall population vs. population who had parents who had different native languages from one another, and neither language was English**

Parents had different native languages, neither was English

Overall population



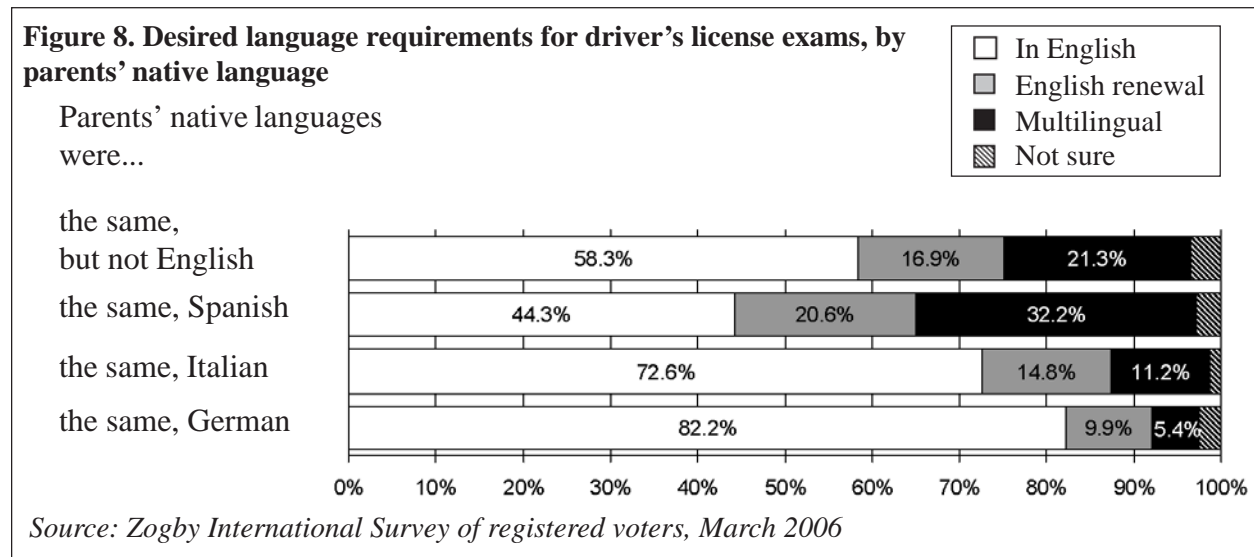
Source: Zogby International Survey of registered voters, March 2006

In families where the parents had different native languages, but neither one was English, only 15 percent of the children favored multilingual driver’s license exams, and nearly two-in-three favored exams in English – a greater accent on English than that of the entire white, non-Hispanic population.

The larger populations of some native language groups in our survey enabled us to compare the children of three native languages within the same non-English native language groups. We were able to identify a large enough sample size for populations whose parents both spoke Spanish, Italian, or German

The variance in the results suggests that the demand for driver’s license exams in foreign languages may be more a product of where immigrants come from, than a product of immigration itself. More than 80 percent of the children of German-speaking parents favored exams solely in English, and that figure soars above 90 percent when those who favor license renewals in English are included. Children of Italian parents also far exceed the sentiments of the population overall, recording 73 percent, and 87 percent, respectively. However, one-third of the children of Spanish speaking par-

ents want multilingual drivers license exams, triple the rate of Italian descendants and six times the rate of Germans. Only 44 percent of the children of Spanish speakers want driver’s license exams to be conducted solely in English. This rate, while a plurality, was the lowest recorded among any subgroup in the survey.. The results are shown in figure 8.



## Conclusion

As the nation continues to deal with a swelling immigrant population, it will be interesting to see if states begin to use English language driver’s license exams as an assimilation and growth tool, much as welfare reform changed that program from delivering benefits to delivering jobs. It will also be interesting to see whether states expand “graduated licensing programs” to language learning in the same manner, i.e. *temporary* assistance toward a *permanent* goal.

Regardless of the future turn of events, the status quo does not balance with the public desire. The majority of Americans disagree with the provision of driver’s license exams in languages other than English. More than three-quarters of the population favors a licensing policy which requires the demonstration of English proficiency, either as a pre-requisite to any type of driver’s license, or as part of a graduating licensing system. The prevailing opinion runs contrary to the actions of the state motor vehicle departments in almost 90 percent of the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

It is notable to realize that most of the efforts to offer driver’s license exams in languages other than English have been achieved on the bureaucratic level, agency-wide decisions made by an appointed leader. It is clear that if such decisions had to be made on the legislative level, where the decision makers would be subject to public scrutiny come election time, the provision of foreign language driver’s license exams would be few and far between.

## Appendix A: Languages and Licenses

The chart below shows the nine most common languages spoken at home in each state and the District of Columbia, excluding English. Driver's license exams are available in a given state for any languages listed in **bold** type. The languages in which a state offers drivers' license exams have only a weak correlation to the most commonly spoken languages in that state. States are more likely to issue driver's license exams in the ninth most common language (17 states), than in the fourth most common language (14 states).

| State             | 2nd     | 3rd        | 4th        | 5th        | 6th            | 7th            | 8th            | 9th        | 10th           |
|-------------------|---------|------------|------------|------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|------------|----------------|
| Alabama           | Spanish | German     | French     | Chinese    | Vietnamese     | Korean         | Arabic         | Japanese   | Italian        |
| Alaska            | Spanish | Yupik      | Tagalog    | Inupik     | Korean         | German         | Russian        | French     | Eskimo         |
| Arizona           | Spanish | Navaho     | German     | French     | Chinese        | Apache         | Tagalog        | Vietnamese | Pima           |
| Arkansas          | Spanish | German     | French     | Vietnamese | Laotian        | Chinese        | Tagalog        | Korean     | Japanese       |
| California        | Spanish | Tagalog    | Chinese    | Vietnamese | Korean         | Armenian       | Japanese       | Persian    | Cantonese      |
| Colorado          | Spanish | German     | French     | Vietnamese | Korean         | Russian        | Chinese        | Japanese   | Italian        |
| Connecticut       | Spanish | Italian    | French     | Polish     | Portuguese     | German         | Chinese        | Greek      | Russian        |
| Delaware          | Spanish | French     | German     | Chinese    | Italian        | Polish         | Korean         | Tagalog    | Fr. Creole     |
| Dist. of Columbia | Spanish | French     | German     | Amharic    | Chinese        | Arabic         | Kru/Ibo/Yoruba | Italian    | Vietnamese     |
| Florida           | Spanish | Fr. Creole | French     | German     | Italian        | Portuguese     | Tagalog        | Arabic     | Vietnamese     |
| Georgia           | Spanish | French     | German     | Vietnamese | Korean         | Chinese        | Gujarathi      | Arabic     | Arabic         |
| Hawaii            | Tagalog | Japanese   | Ilocano    | Chinese    | Hawaiian       | Spanish        | Korean         | Samoan     | Vietnamese     |
| Idaho             | Spanish | German     | French     | Japanese   | Serbrocroatian | Portuguese     | Vietnamese     | Tagalog    | Russian        |
| Illinois          | Spanish | Polish     | German     | Tagalog    | Italian        | Chinese        | Korean         | Greek      | French         |
| Indiana           | Spanish | German     | French     | Chinese    | Pa. Dutch      | Polish         | Dutch          | Japanese   | Arabic         |
| Iowa              | Spanish | German     | French     | Vietnamese | Serbrocroatian | Chinese        | Laotian        | Korean     | Russian        |
| Kansas            | Spanish | German     | Vietnamese | French     | Chinese        | Korean         | Laotian        | Arabic     | Tagalog        |
| Kentucky          | Spanish | German     | French     | Chinese    | Japanese       | Korean         | Arabic         | Vietnamese | Serbrocroatian |
| Louisiana         | French  | Spanish    | Vietnamese | Cajun      | German         | Arabic         | Chinese        | Fr. Creole | Italian        |
| Maine             | French  | Spanish    | German     | Italian    | Chinese        | Cambodian      | Vietnamese     | Russian    | Passamaquoddy  |
| Maryland          | Spanish | French     | Chinese    | Korean     | German         | Kru/Ibo/Yoruba | Tagalog        | Russian    | Vietnamese     |
| Massachusetts     | Spanish | Portuguese | French     | Italian    | Chinese        | Fr. Creole     | Russian        | Vietnamese | Greek          |
| Michigan          | Spanish | Arabic     | German     | Polish     | French         | Italian        | Syriac         | Chinese    | Korean         |
| Minnesota         | Spanish | Hmong      | German     | Vietnamese | French         | Somali         | Chinese        | Russian    | Norwegian      |
| Mississippi       | Spanish | French     | German     | Choctaw    | Vietnamese     | Chinese        | Tagalog        | Korean     | Italian        |
| Missouri          | Spanish | German     | French     | Vietnamese | Chinese        | Serbrocroatian | Italian        | Russian    | Arabic         |
| Montana           | Spanish | German     | Crow       | French     | Cheyenne       | Blackfoot      | Dakota         | Norwegian  | Italian        |
| Nebraska          | Spanish | German     | Vietnamese | French     | Czech          | Chinese        | Arabic         | Russian    | Italian        |
| Nevada            | Spanish | Tagalog    | German     | Chinese    | French         | Korean         | Italian        | Japanese   | Vietnamese     |
| New Hampshire     | French  | Spanish    | German     | Greek      | Chinese        | Italian        | Portuguese     | Polish     | Arabic         |

**(Appendix A, continued)**

| State          | 2nd            | 3rd               | 4th               | 5th               | 6th              | 7th            | 8th                  | 9th             | 10th            |
|----------------|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| New Jersey     | <b>Spanish</b> | Italian           | <b>Polish</b>     | <b>Portuguese</b> | Tagalog          | <b>Chinese</b> | Korean               | Gujarathi       | <b>Arabic</b>   |
| New Mexico     | <b>Spanish</b> | Navaho            | Keres             | German            | Zuni             | French         | Tewa                 | Chinese         | Vietnamese      |
| New York       | <b>Spanish</b> | <b>Chinese</b>    | Italian           | <b>Russian</b>    | <b>French</b>    | Fr. Creole     | Yiddish              | <b>Polish</b>   | <b>Korean</b>   |
| North Carolina | <b>Spanish</b> | French            | German            | Vietnamese        | Chinese          | Korean         | Arabic               | Hmong           | Tagalog         |
| North Dakota   | German         | <b>Spanish</b>    | Norwegian         | French            | Dakota           | Czech          | <b>Serbocroatian</b> | Hidatsa         | Ukrainian       |
| Ohio           | <b>Spanish</b> | German            | <b>French</b>     | Italian           | <b>Arabic</b>    | <b>Chinese</b> | Polish               | Pa. Dutch       | <b>Russian</b>  |
| Oklahoma       | <b>Spanish</b> | German            | Vietnamese        | French            | Cherokee         | Chinese        | Muskogee             | Korean          | Choctaw         |
| Oregon         | <b>Spanish</b> | German            | <b>Vietnamese</b> | <b>Russian</b>    | Chinese          | French         | <b>Japanese</b>      | <b>Korean</b>   | Tagalog         |
| Pennsylvania   | <b>Spanish</b> | German            | German            | French            | Pa. Dutch        | Chinese        | Russian              | Polish          | Korean          |
| Rhode Island   | <b>Spanish</b> | <b>Portuguese</b> | <b>French</b>     | <b>Italian</b>    | <b>Cambodian</b> | Fr. Creole     | <b>Laotian</b>       | <b>Chinese</b>  | <b>Polish</b>   |
| South Carolina | <b>Spanish</b> | <b>French</b>     | German            | Chinese           | Tagalog          | Vietnamese     | <b>Korean</b>        | Italian         | <b>Japanese</b> |
| South Dakota   | German         | Dakota            | Spanish           | French            | Norwegian        | Czech          | Vietnamese           | Serbocroatian   | Chinese         |
| Tennessee      | <b>Spanish</b> | German            | French            | Vietnamese        | <b>Korean</b>    | Arabic         | Chinese              | Laotian         | <b>Japanese</b> |
| Texas          | <b>Spanish</b> | Vietnamese        | German            | Chinese           | French           | Tagalog        | Korean               | Urdu            | Arabic          |
| Utah           | <b>Spanish</b> | German            | Navaho            | French            | Portuguese       | Vietnamese     | Tongan               | Japanese        | Chinese         |
| Vermont        | <b>French</b>  | Spanish           | German            | French            | Italian          | Polish         | <b>Vietnamese</b>    | Chinese         | Russian         |
| Virginia       | <b>Spanish</b> | French            | Korean            | Tagalog           | German           | Vietnamese     | Arabic               | Chinese         | Persian         |
| Washington     | <b>Spanish</b> | Tagalog           | <b>Vietnamese</b> | German            | <b>Korean</b>    | <b>Chinese</b> | <b>Russian</b>       | <b>Japanese</b> | French          |
| West Virginia  | Spanish        | French            | German            | Italian           | Arabic           | Chinese        | Japanese             | Tagalog         | Greek           |
| Wisconsin      | <b>Spanish</b> | German            | <b>Hmong</b>      | French            | <b>Polish</b>    | Italian        | <b>Chinese</b>       | <b>Russian</b>  | <b>Arabic</b>   |
| Wyoming        | Spanish        | German            | French            | Arapaho           | Japanese         | Shoshoni       | Chinese              | Italian         | Korean          |
| Total States   | 43             | 17                | 14                | 17                | 16               | 12             | 17                   | 17              | 16              |

**Footnotes**

- 1- Borjas, George J. "The Economic Integration of Immigration in the United States." United Nations University Discussion Paper No. 2003/78. Dec. 2003
- 2- Ibid.
- 3- Ibid.
- 4- Maine, Department of the Secretary of State, Bureau of Motor Vehicles, <http://www.maine.gov/sos/bmv/youngdriver.htm>, 15 May 2006
- 5- Florida, Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles, <http://www.hsmv.state.fl.us/dhl/teendriv.html>, 14 December 2006
- 6- Missouri, Department of Revenue, <http://dor.mo.gov/mvdl/drivers/dlguide/chapter11.pdf>, 13 December 2006
- 7- Illinois, Department of Motor Vehicles, <http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/drivers/programs/gdl.html>, 13 December 2006
- 8- Massachusetts, Registry of Motor Vehicles, <http://www.mass.gov/rmv/dmanual/chapter2.pdf>, 13 December 2006
- 9- U.S. English, Inc. Research, 2006
- 10- U.S. Census Bureau; Detailed Language Spoken at Home for the Population 5 Years and Over; [http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/lang\\_use.html](http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/lang_use.html), 14 March 2006
- 11- New York, Department of Motor Vehicles, <http://www.nydmv.state.ny.us/broch/c41.htm>, 12 December 2006
- 12- Kansas, Department of Revenue, <http://www.ksrevenue.org/dmvtreen.htm>, 14 December 2006