

ISSUE BRIEFING

E Pluribus Unum: Out of Many, One

Why English as a common language is critical to America's unity

"In the first place, we should insist that if the immigrant who comes here in good faith becomes an American and assimilates himself to us, he shall be treated on an exact equality with everyone else, for it is an outrage to discriminate against any such man because of creed, or birthplace, or origin. But this is predicated upon the person's becoming in every facet an American and nothing but an American..."

Theodore Roosevelt, 1907

Introduction

All U.S. coins since 1873. The seal of the President of the United States. The seals of the Vice President of the United States, of the United States Congress, of the United States House of Representatives, of the United States Senate and of the United States Supreme Court. All of these uniquely American symbols contain the phrase *E Pluribus Unum*: out of many, one.

This motto of the United States of America has come to represent what our nation is all about. We are a melting pot, the place where people of all backgrounds, colors and cultures come together. But without a common language unifying us, *E Pluribus Unum* cannot exist. Alexis de Tocqueville, the preeminent observer of American civic culture, wrote, "The tie of language is perhaps the strongest and most durable that can unite mankind."

Support for making English the official language of the United States government is broad and bipartisan. Recent polling data shows 84 percent of Americans are supportive of English as the official language of the United States, 80 percent of U.S. voters believe immigrants who move to America should adopt American culture, and 81 percent support a U.S. company's right to require employees to speak English on the job¹. So why, with strong and consistent support of English as our official language, are some still opposed to the concept?

In the following pages, this issue briefing will examine the most common arguments promoted by opponents of Official English. We will use clear and easy to understand research, charts and arguments to make the logical case supporting English as our nation's binding language.

Part I: Out of many, one: Will one official language make it harder for immigrants to succeed?

Part II: Out of many, one: Will one official language prevent active citizenship?

Part III: Out of many, one: Will one official language put immigrants' children at a disadvantage?

Part IV: Out of many, one: Will one official language put immigrants' health at risk?

Out of many, one: Will one language make it harder for immigrants to succeed?

In 2007, the native born population earned, on average, \$65,021, compared to the average \$50,867 earned by the foreign-born population². And while 99 million native-born people have graduated high school or attended some college, only 12 million foreign-born people can say the same¹¹.

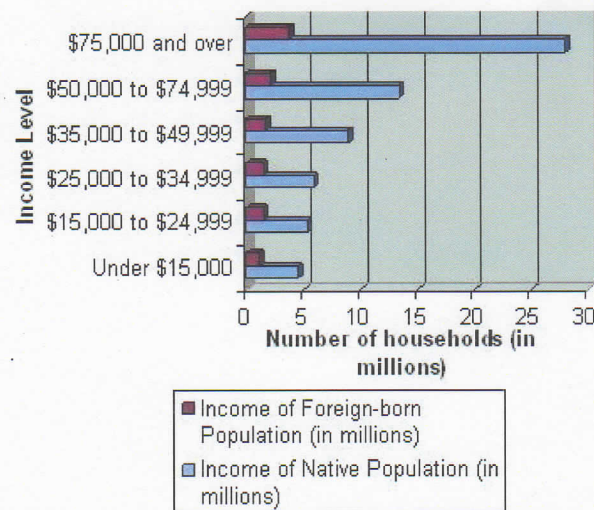
Non-English speakers face additional challenges as they fall behind the rest of the population when it comes to educational attainment and income. Yet those opposed to Official English claim that by naming English as the language of our government, immigrants will lose access to necessary government services, access to job opportunities and a host of other falsities.

The Official English movement advocates that providing constant native language translations to receive government services places immigrants at a disadvantage. While we support the right of immigrants to maintain their native language and heritage, it is clear that without the government providing translation services, immigrants are pressured to learn English in order to gain access to these government resources. This, in turn, allows them not only to receive the services they desire, but also puts them at an advantage when applying for a job.

Each year, \$65 billion in wages are lost due to poor English language skills¹⁰. Take this real world example: in October of 2011, the Hispanic unemployment rate in the Providence area was more than twice the unemployment rate of the entire state of Rhode Island. This discrepancy has been attributed to a move away from what was once a manufacturing base, leaving people who once held those manufacturing jobs now struggling to find new work that does not require them to speak English³.

And while opponents claim that Official English will discriminate against immigrants, in 2002, two professors from New Mexico published a study in the academic journal "Applied Economics," in which they presented findings demonstrating that immigrants who reside in states that have passed Official English make more of an effort to learn English than those who reside in states without English as the official language.

Income of Native vs. Foreign-born Populations, 2007



Immigrants who have learned more English are more likely to be employed, more likely to be employed in higher-skilled jobs and more likely to earn more money. These immigrants are also more likely to be involved in their communities or participate in education or training programs⁴. The bottom line is that more literate immigrants are more involved citizens.

Out of many, one: Will one language prevent active citizenship?

The United States is a land of opportunity. Since its founding, our government has operated through a democratic process, following the goals and ideals presented in the Declaration of Independence—a Declaration proclaiming the unalienable rights of all: among them life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

In 2010, our nation's immigrant population reached 40 million—the highest number in United States history⁵. Over the past decade, nearly 14 million new immigrants settled here, showing that even as our country has faced rampant unemployment, job loss and a growing national debt, it is still a land of promise and a place where foreigners and natural born citizens alike can aspire to reach the American dream.

Despite this desire among many foreigners to experience life in America, there are increasing numbers of United States residents who have not, by choice or by circumstance, learned our nation's de-facto language: English. In fact, the number of Americans who speak English "not at all" jumped from 1.22 million in 1980 to 3.37 million in 2000, to 4.49 million in 2007⁶.

“91 percent of foreign-born Latino immigrants agree that learning English is essential to succeed in the U.S.”

Unfortunately, what has been hailed as the melting pot already appears to be on its way to becoming a salad bowl. Rather than cultures blending together into one, pockets of people sharing the same background or foreign language are popping up across the country, giving citizens no room to grow, no room to learn, no room to share their unique history.

All too often, critics of Official English claim that designating English as the official language of the United States will cause a collapse of all other cultures and languages within the country. Opponents of Official English often argue that providing documents such as driver's license manuals, election ballots and government forms in English (rather than foreign languages) will isolate foreign-language speakers and prevent them from participating in American society.

In reality, English is the single most important factor in an immigrant becoming an American. Since 1906, some capacity to speak English has been a formal legal requirement for naturalization. By printing ballots, driver's license manuals and other materials only in selected languages, we are isolating smaller populations of foreign language speakers, who will still be left out of the election process. In addition, the cost of these materials adds up for already cash-strapped localities. An Election Supervisor in Highlands County, Florida estimated that providing bilingual ballots could cost just his *one county* \$32,000 to \$50,000 per election⁸. And the California Department of Motor Vehicles reported that the annual cost to provide language services is \$2.2 million⁹. To provide these same translation services nationwide would cost nearly \$8.5 million each year⁶. Many state and local governments do not have room in their budgets to spend money translating documents, many of which will never get used, into foreign languages.

“79 percent of Americans believe immigrants should be required to learn English before they are granted citizenship¹⁰.”

Rather than pandering to foreign language speakers in their native language and delaying their assimilation, we should use government processes (such as elections and driver's license exams) to encourage immigrants to learn the English language, showing them that only when they fully grasp the English language will they fully be able to participate in society as U.S. citizens.

Out of many, one: Will one language put immigrants' children at a disadvantage?

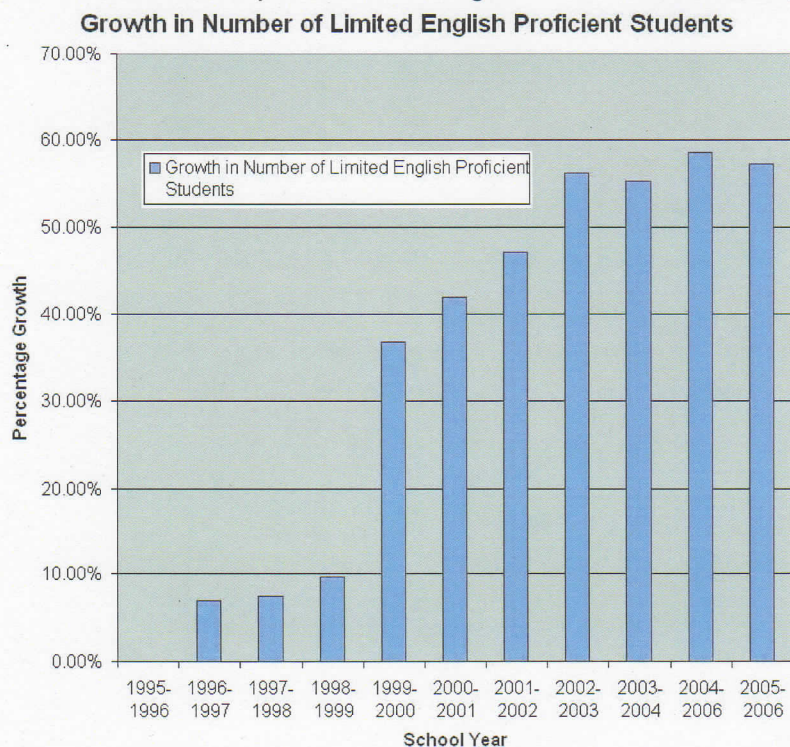
One of the most common inaccuracies spread by opponents of Official English is that establishing English as our national language will eliminate the ability to read, write and speak other languages. To the contrary, the Official English movement strongly encourages the learning of foreign languages. In our increasingly global economy, bilingualism can net an employee an average of 58 cents more per hour than a monolingual employee¹¹, and teaching a foreign language while a child is school-aged sets them up for the biggest advantage later in life.

The Official English movement does stress that English should be the primary language of America—and citizens are encouraged to learn additional languages on top of that. Nowhere does this become more important than when examining our nation's school systems.

From 1995-2005, there was a 57 percent jump in the number of limited English proficient students nationwide¹². And between 1980 and 2009, the number of children ages 5-17 who spoke a language other than English at home jumped from 4.7 million to 11.2 million, establishing that 21 percent of that school-aged population speaks a language other than English at home¹³.

For a parent who speaks another language at home, due to language barriers, he or she is likely to be less involved in the child's education and is more likely to rely on the child to act as a translator in day to day situations. For the child, not only do many school districts not have the resources needed to meet the needs of limited English proficient (LEP) students, but LEP students are more likely to drop out of school than ever to become proficient in English¹⁴. Not to mention, LEP students have much lower

high school graduation rates nationally than other students.



The solution is clear: learn English. Anti-Official English advocates often claim that most immigrants recognize the benefit of learning English upon arriving in the United States, and that Official English would only serve to make them legally bound to do something they already agree to. Statistics, however, indicate otherwise. The 2000 Census showed that astonishingly, only one-fourth of elementary-aged English language learners are foreign born—with three out of five born in the U.S. to immigrant parents, and one out of five

being third-generation immigrants. If immigrants chose to learn English on their own, the three-fourths of our nation's elementary English language learners who were born to immigrant parents would be raised with knowledge of English as well.

“96 percent of Latinos say it is very important to teach English to the children of immigrant families¹⁵.”

Official English serves many advantages when it comes to improving the educational success of immigrants and their children, and understanding these benefits is crucial to ensuring the bright future of our coming generations.

Out of many, one: Will one language put immigrants' health at risk?

Opponents of Official English argue that making English our nation's official language will remove translation services and will thus leave foreign language speakers at risk when dealing with urgent medical issues. In reality, a closer look needs to be taken at the issue of language barriers in the health care field.

As previously discussed, when an immigrant is not proficient in English, he or she is less likely to have a high paying job—or a job that offers benefits like insurance coverage. A 2003 report from the Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured found that language proficiency has a strong impact on health insurance coverage, access to healthcare and the quality of that care. It asserts that limited English proficiency is tied to lack of insurance and problems communicating with health care providers.

“Latinos who have... limited English proficiency are much more likely to be uninsured, less likely to use health care services, and more likely to experience problems communicating with their health care providers¹⁶.”

On top of the risk to health, limited English proficiency in healthcare is expensive: healthcare providers spend up to \$267 million for interpretation services, about \$4 per LEP emergency room, inpatient, outpatient or dentist visit¹⁷. So not only does limited English proficiency put immigrants at risk of mistakes in diagnosis or treatment, misunderstanding medical instructions and other serious complications, but it also places an added financial burden on the federal agencies required to pay these bills.

Learning English would not only place immigrants on stronger footing when it comes to taking control of their own health, but it would also save government agencies millions of dollars that could be used to make further advances in healthcare and medicine. It is worth noting that Official English legislation generally includes exemptions in the event of health and medical emergencies. This means that even if a county, state or the country declares English their official language, if someone has a health or medical emergency, personnel are still able to interact in the at-risk person's native language. The bottom line is that Official English promotes English learning, which can lead to better medical care—but it also does no harm to non-English speakers, as it does not prevent the government from using other languages when necessary in health situations.

Conclusion

Each nation around the globe showcases its own unique customs, traditions and history. In America, the melding of these is what allows us to become one. In order for America to remain the melting pot it has so proudly become, there must be a way for each individual to share his or her own history. We must have a common uniting factor—otherwise America becomes a nation divided into countless distinct cultural groups, each operating independently of one another, each living in a bubble of customs, traditions and lifestyles familiar to its home country.

Immigrants come to America for many reasons, but above all, most come here to prosper. They come here in hopes of pursuing the American dream and creating a better life for themselves and their future generations. A USA Today poll found that 76% of immigrants want to become naturalized citizens to gain the right to vote; 70% thanks to the legal rights and protections that come along with citizenship; and 65% of immigrants wanted to become naturalized because of the commitment and pride in being an American¹⁸. Rather than focusing on our differences and what divides us, we must focus on the one thing that has the power to unite all Americans: a common language, English.

“We must in every way possible encourage the immigrant to rise, help him up, give him a chance to help himself. If we try to carry him he may well prove not well worth carrying. We must in turn insist upon his showing the same standard of fealty to this country and to join with us in raising the level of our common American citizenship.”

Theodore Roosevelt, 1916

Sources

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- ³ The Providence Journal. "Providence-Warwick-Fall River area has nation's highest Hispanic jobless rate," by Kate Bramson. October 12, 2011.
- ⁴ "A Human Capital Concern: The Literacy Proficiency of U.S. Immigrants," by Andrew Sun, Irwin Kirsch & Kentaro Yamamoto. Educational Testing Service Policy Information Report, March 2004.
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- ⁷ Kaiser Family Foundation poll, 2002.
- ⁸ "Bilingual ballots not required," by Robert Boyer. Highlands Today, October 15, 2011.
- ⁹ U.S. Office of Management and Budget, Report to Congress, "Assessment of the Total Benefits and Costs of Implementing Executive Order 13166: Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency," March 14, 2002.
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