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**American Identity and Public Opinion:
How What it Means to be an American Influences
Language Policy Preferences**

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Abstract:

In this paper, I build upon previous research that has shown how notions of what it means to be an American can influence policy preferences. I do so by analyzing how several conceptions of American citizenship, namely liberalism, civic republicanism, and ethnoculturalism, affect support for declaring English the official language and printing election ballots only in English. Using focus group research, I show that these three conceptions provide a useful, though incomplete, framework for describing Americans' perceptions of their national identity and for examining how those perceptions influence opinions. Further, I argue that the direction in which conceptions of national identity influence preferences will depend on the particular aspects of identity that people emphasize.

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Introduction

In 1965, Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments, ending over 40 years of strict immigration restrictions. This act eliminated country-specific quotas and shifted the policy focus toward family re-unification (Edmonston and Passel 1994). There have been two primary results of this policy shift. First, the overall number of immigrants entering the country each year has increased dramatically. During the 1960s, the U.S. saw an average of 332,000 immigrants entering the country per year, a figure that has risen to 991,000 for the 1990s.¹ Estimates suggest that the foreign born now comprise almost 10 percent of the U.S. population, up from 5 percent in 1970 (Camarota 1999). Second, the countries from which most immigrants are coming have shifted away from Europe and toward Asia and Latin America. According to the INS, immigration from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean accounts for over 70 percent of all legal immigration to the U.S. whereas in the 50s and early 60s, it accounted for only 47 percent.²

Several public policy issues have gained prominence in response to these demographic changes. Policies that deal with language have become particularly contentious over the past twenty years and debates about how to respond to the needs of non-English-speaking residents and citizens have become an important feature of American political discourse. To date, 26 states have declared English the official state language. Of these 26 declarations, 21 have occurred since 1980 and 9 have occurred since 1990 (National Education Association, *US English, English First*).³ At least twelve of the remaining 24 states have debated making English official during this past decade,⁴ leaving—as of this writing—only twelve states that have not considered official-English legislation in recent history. Many cities, counties, and towns have also passed various types of language policies, including ordinances regulating the languages of signs in stores (see, for example, Cotliar 1996 and Branigin 1999).

In response to the increasing prominence of debates about language and ethnicity, political scientists have begun to examine several different aspects of this issue area. Some scholars have tried to understand why certain states have chosen to declare English the official state language (Hero 1998; Tatalovich 1995; Gamble 1997) while others study how Congress and the courts address language and immigration issues (Gimpel and Edwards 1999). Another set of research examines public opinion and seeks to understand how Americans feel about issues that arise from ethnic change and why. To summarize their findings, the dominant influences on attitudes appear to be conceptions of American identity, education, income, partisanship, ideology, economic perceptions, and ethnicity. Some of these factors, such as American identity and education, are consistently significant across studies while others, such as partisanship and income, are more erratic (Espenshade and Calhoun 1993; Espenshade and Hempstead 1996;

¹ U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service Statistical Yearbook, 1997. INS estimates that the 1990s have also seen about 275,000 undocumented immigrants entering the United States per year.

² U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service Statistical Yearbook, 1997.

³ In November of 1998, Alaska voters overwhelmingly approved an initiative to declare English the official state language. However, a superior court judge granted an injunction to prohibit the law from going into effect until its constitutionality is determined (“Opponents of Official English Law Win Preliminary Injunction,” AP Wire 1999). Also, in 1999, Arizona’s official-English law was declared unconstitutional (Greenhouse 1999). Thus, only 24 of the 26 states have language laws that are in effect.

⁴ Those twelve states are ID, IA, KS, ME, MD, MN, OH, PA, RI, UT, WA, and WI.

Huddy and Sears 1995; Hood et al. 1997; Hood and Morris 1997; Vidanage and Sears 1995; Frendreis and Tatalovich 1997; Citrin et al. 1990, 1997, 1998). The work presented in this paper stems from this last set of projects. The arguments developed and tested here deal with the question of whether and how symbolic predispositions about the nature of what it means to be an American shape attitudes about language policy.

By adopting Rogers Smith's tripartite description of American national identity—consisting of liberalism, civic republicanism, and ethnoculturalism (1997, 1993, 1988)—I improve upon research that has sought to understand the relationship between identity and opinions. Smith's treatment of American identity encompasses a broader range of concerns than is typically included in public opinion surveys. And in developing each component as a distinct tradition with its own intellectual and legal history, Smith avoids placing these three traditions along a single dimension with liberal norms at one end and ethnocultural or racist beliefs at the other. In this paper, I take Smith's conceptions of American identity and analyze how they influence attitudes toward the specific policies of declaring English the official language and printing election ballots only in English.⁵

In the sections that follow, I will briefly explain how and why symbolic conceptions of national identity shape attitudes in this issue area and summarize evidence from previous research. Next I will define the framework of American identity that I argue scholars should use to study the relationship between identity and opinion in this issue domain and lay out some specific hypotheses. Then, using data from focus groups conducted in New Jersey in 1998, I show that Smith's three conceptions of American identity provide a useful, though incomplete, framework for describing Americans' perceptions of their national identity and for examining how those perceptions influence opinions. I find that although liberal, republican, and ethnocultural discourse dominate discussions about language and ethnicity, adherence to these broad traditions is not enough to determine whether someone will support or oppose restrictive language policies, at least as far as liberalism and civic republicanism are concerned. These abstract notions of American identity have several symbolic manifestations. The direction in which they influence opinions depends upon which of those manifestations is most salient.

Symbols, Identity, and Language

Why Symbols Matter: Edelman (1985 [1964]) and Elder and Cobb (1983) write that symbols are powerful because of the functional needs that they fulfill. In a complex world where people often lack control over their surroundings, they are drawn to symbols to help them understand and derive meaning from the political and social environment. Needs, hopes, and anxieties provoke a quest for simplicity, conformity, and security. Political symbols can be used to make the complex seem simple and can provide prescriptions for bringing order to a disorderly world. In other words, due to a variety of psychic needs, individuals rely on symbols to help them make sense of the world. When people are asked for their opinions on matters of public policy, their symbolic predispositions guide them through the process of arriving at and articulating an answer.

⁵ My initial intent was to have bilingual education be an equal partner in this analysis, but discussions on that topic were quite different from the discussions on the other two policies. Briefly, opinions on different approaches to bilingual education are largely driven by concerns about effectiveness, not identity.

A central theme of Elder and Cobb's argument is that while there must be consensus that a given symbol is important if it is to take on a functional role in society, it is not necessary that people derive shared meaning from that symbol. People can agree that a particular symbol embodies critical societal norms and values, but they can interpret it quite differently. Divergent interpretations will lead to divergent preferences even when people agree on the overall importance of the symbol or value in question. Elder and Cobb write, "The meaning of the message is heavily colored by the significance to the receiver of the symbols involved and his or her own interpretation of their meaning. The same symbol may communicate different things to different people... This heterogeneity of interpretation is likely to go unrecognized, however, because all are reacting to the same objective stimuli and tend to assume that the meaning they find there is intrinsic to the symbols involved and thus common to all" (1983: 10). For example, two different individuals can agree that allowing citizens to take part in the political process is a central component of American identity yet rely on that idea to arrive at opposing preferences. One person may feel that regulating language use is an affront to a participatory democracy while another may feel that a common language is necessary in order for members of the polity to take part in the common pursuit of self-governance.

Taken together, the findings of previous research suggest that conceptions of American identity are indeed a central component in determining policy preferences (Espenshade and Calhoun 1993; Huddy and Sears 1995; Vidanage and Sears 1995; Frensdreis and Tatalovich 1997; Citrin et al. 1990, Citrin and Duff 1998). Yet as I see it, these studies suffer from two main flaws. First, they often rely on a small number of survey items designed to tap into feelings about national identity and overlook some important ideas about what many citizens think being American means. For example, the civic republican conception of American identity is virtually absent from public opinion surveys. If this conception is an important part of the American psyche and if we believe that conceptions of identity shape attitudes, then it should factor into our models. Moreover, national identity should not be thought of as a single dimension. By this I mean that one cannot measure a person's definition of American identity along a single scale with liberal democratic ideals at one end and exclusionary or racist ones at the other. People are not simply liberal or ethnocultural and these two components of American identity are not polar opposites. People can adhere to either one, or to both, and important conceptions of American identity are overlooked when a dichotomous measure is used.

Second, they do not test whether each conception of American identity consistently leads to a particular policy preference. In other words, it may not be the case that liberal ideals always lead one to oppose restrictive policies. Framing, context, and interpretation should all play a part in whether and how different components of national identity influence opinion-formation. For example, if the debate is not framed in liberal terms, then liberal ideals might not be influential in this issue area despite their centrality to definitions of "American-ness." In short, the existing literature does a good job of establishing that conceptions of American identity matter in the opinion-formation process, but does not do as good a job of establishing which conceptions matter or when they lead to support and when they lead to opposition. In the following sections, I hope to address these flaws by using focus groups to study the relationship between identity and policy views. But first I explain the main symbolic predispositions and hypotheses in my study.

Conceptions of Identity: The three symbolic conceptions of national identity that guide my analysis are drawn directly from Smith's (1997) work on the development of citizenship laws in

the United States. He writes that liberalism, civic republicanism, and ethnoculturalism constitute the “civic myths” that have at different times, and often simultaneously, determined who is and is not allowed to be considered an American. Given the powerful role these traditions have played at the elite level throughout American history, it is likely that regular Americans will identify with them and use to them help navigate the political and social world.

As is well known, the tenets of *liberalism* grew out of the Enlightenment and present a philosophy grounded in beliefs about universal rights. Liberalism maintains that the private lives of individuals should be free from arbitrary government intervention and that the rule of law is paramount in protecting this freedom. The emphasis on the private rights of individuals and the privileges of citizenship translates into a reverence for tolerance, individualism, privacy, and civil rights and liberties. It also leads to a preference for minimal government and a free market economy where people are able to pursue individual private gain (Kingdon 1999). But above all, the liberal philosophy asserts that people are fundamentally equal and that all of these things—liberty, freedom, opportunity, etc.—should be applied to all simply by virtue of being human.

The “problem” liberalism has with immigration and ethnic change is that it is more or less silent on issues relating to the manner in which new members should be incorporated into the polity. It teaches people to value being free to do what they want and to tolerate other people’s right to do what *they* want, but it does not place much stock in forging common ties with fellow citizens. So my expectation is that liberal discourse simply will not appear that much in the focus groups. In other words, people will not find liberal prescriptions all that useful when considering policies that suggest specific acts be taken to improve interactions among citizens. When liberalism does emerge, I expect it to be associated with opposition to official language laws, with people arguing that such laws restrict freedom of speech or violate other rights and liberties.

Whether liberalism has a singular hold of the American ideological psyche has been a matter of much debate (Appleby 1986; Banning 1986). Another alternative, one that is proposed not instead of but rather in addition to, liberalism, is *civic republicanism*. The civic republican tradition, unlike liberalism, emphasizes the responsibilities of citizens. It highlights the importance of participating in public life and working to sustain a sense of community. In the ideal form, individual citizens value the collective good over personal private gain (Held 1996). This image of the active citizen working to promote the general welfare is a prominent symbol in American political consciousness. The notion that ours is a government “of the people, by the people, for the people” is well-known and widely cherished. Tocqueville’s endorsement of the New England township has provided a romanticized image to accompany the more abstract arguments in favor of political participation.⁶ According to this image, citizens are well informed and fulfill the duties of citizenship by participating and deliberating with one another in the pursuit of a stable, energetic, and harmonious community (Conover et al 1991; Barber 1984).

As far as hypotheses are concerned, civic republicanism presents a more interesting and complicated scenario than liberalism. Whether public life is conducted in one or multiple languages profoundly shapes the alternatives available for working together to promote the common good. Civic republican themes should therefore feature prominently in discussions about declaring English the official language and printing election ballots only in English. Yet I

⁶ See *Democracy in America*, Vintage Books edition, 1990, Chapter V, pp. 59-97.

expect interpretations of how these symbols lead to a well-functioning community of informed and involved citizens to vary. They will lead some people to favor English-only policies as they lead others to oppose them. On the one hand, when people associate the republican tradition with close-knit communities and when they fear that Americans do not have enough in common, they will be in favor of regulating language use. These beliefs will manifest themselves in the argument that the United States is so diverse that a common language is the only hope we have of maintaining any sense of community or that a socially homogeneous populace is necessary for creating conditions that allow Americans are to live up to the civic republican ideal. On the other hand, when interpretations of the civic republican ideal emphasize an informed and involved citizenry, people will be more likely to oppose official-English laws. This interpretation would lead to the argument that we must ensure that citizens are allowed to participate meaningfully in the political process regardless of what language they speak.

Finally, *ethnoculturalism* is the belief that certain ascriptive or immutable characteristics dictate who can and cannot be an American citizen. More specifically, it is the belief that Americans are white English-speaking Protestants of northern European ancestry. Ethnocultural episodes in America are often labeled as aberrations from our true liberal republican nature, but simply believing in liberty and freedom has often not been enough to qualify people as American. As Smith points out, for much of America's history, a majority of the population was denied citizenship due to race, gender, or original nationality (1997). We needn't look further than the history of slavery or the internment of thousands of Americans of Japanese descent during WWII for evidence. Rather than simply being an aberration, ethnoculturalism, Smith argues, is a full-fledged conception of American identity in its own right.

Unlike liberalism and civic republicanism, it is rare to see ethnoculturalism explicitly endorsed as a definition of American identity, at least as far as mainstream political discourse is concerned. Despite this lack of public endorsement, implicit or subtle references to the idea that certain ascriptive characteristics define who is and is not an American are still common. Debates about whether to make English the official language or provide voting materials only in English directly relate to these types of beliefs; language issues simply would not arise if everyone spoke English. That this image is implicated in the existence of language debates leads me to expect ethnocultural themes to emerge in discussions about language policy proposals. When ethnocultural beliefs are expressed, they should lead to support for restrictive language policies. Proponents of official-English legislation who invoke ethnocultural sentiments will see these laws as promoting or protecting their ascriptive vision. However, explicit critiques of the ethnocultural nature of American identity are also common. Many people are openly critical America's legacy of treating its non-white or non-English-speaking residents worse than their white and English-speaking counterparts, and those who make such critiques are likely to view official-English legislation as contributing to that legacy. Thus, ethnocultural discourse should consist of two forms: endorsement and rejection. Endorsements of an ascriptive American identity will lead to support for official-English while rejection will lead to opposition.

Data and Methods

Data: To test these hypotheses, I conducted a series of focus groups in New Jersey from April to December of 1998. Though still not common in social science research, focus groups are becoming more accepted as a way to research and analyze public opinion. Perhaps their most

valuable feature is that they give participants the opportunity to answer the questions of interest in their own words rather than constraining them to a structure imposed by the analyst or by a fixed set of survey responses. Among the many reasons why one might opt for focus groups, perhaps the most basic is that more traditional means, like surveys, have failed to include appropriate questions on the topic of interest or have only asked the appropriate questions infrequently or without sufficient background questions. And even if the proper survey questions have been asked, another reason for using focus groups is that, as Hibbing and Theiss-Morse write, “if we have learned nothing else from survey research it is that we must be very careful to avoid asking respondents to provide more than they are capable of providing” (1995: 39).

Survey questions on language policy or on alternative conceptions of national identity rarely, if ever, appear together. Moreover, people are not regularly called upon to discuss American identity or the role of the English language in American society and when asked to do so will most likely find the task difficult. No doubt, most Americans are socialized to have certain beliefs about what America stands for and they carry these beliefs around with them throughout their lives. But they are rarely asked to articulate what those beliefs are, and surveys are bound to pick up only a superficial understanding of how people conceive of American identity. Furthermore, the potential effects of the policies under investigation can be difficult to discern and this difficulty makes closed-ended questions less appropriate as a method for collecting data. In short, the use of focus groups for this project provides data that is otherwise unavailable and yields insights that more traditional means of opinion analysis cannot. This is not to say that national surveys on these matters are not valuable. Rather, it is often the case that more attention needs to be paid to the design of survey questions, and both sources of data can complement each other by allowing different types of analyses for the same phenomenon.

Participants in the focus groups were recruited from apolitical community organizations in the greater Mercer County area in New Jersey. The current president or organizer of each group was contacted and asked if members of the group would participate in exchange for a small financial donation to the organization. The final sample consists of 14 groups in which all participants within each group had a prior acquaintance with one another. To minimize pressures for social desirability, I tried to have each group be ethnically homogenous and consist only of U.S. citizens. In the end, all but two participants were American citizens and 11 of the 14 groups consisted entirely of either non-Hispanic whites or Hispanic-Americans. Three groups were all Hispanic and eight were all white, non-Hispanic, and the remaining three groups were ethnically heterogeneous.⁷ There were 5 “hobby” clubs (cars, gardening, dance, genealogy, and running), 3 community service or charity organizations (one of which serves the Trenton Hispanic community), 2 business organizations for women, a group of free-lance writers, a public-speaking group, an historical society, and a Chicano culture organization.

The average number of participants per group is 8, with a minimum of 5 and a maximum of 12. The total number of persons interviewed is 108. The sample is disproportionately female (69 percent) due to the fact that many local community groups are for women only. Also, some of the groups in the study have many male members but only the women agreed to participate. The participants range from 18 to 74 years old with a mean age of 47. The mean household income is between \$50,000 and \$60,000. Ninety-one percent of the participants were born in the U.S. Most

⁷ I did not distinguish between “white ethnics” (e.g. people of Irish, German, or Italian descent).

consider themselves to be middle-of-the-road in their political orientations. Forty-two percent identify as independents with the remainder being evenly split among Republicans and Democrats, and 50 percent call themselves moderate with the remainder being more or less evenly split among liberals and conservatives. Before the discussion, 51 percent supported declaring English the official language of the U.S. and 36 percent favored printing election ballots only in English.

The moderator began the group interview by reading the text of HJ Res 37, a.k.a. the English Language Amendment (ELA), a proposed amendment to the Constitution to declare English the official language, and asked participants how they would want their representatives to vote if and when the resolution came to the floor of the House.⁸ The text of the ELA is:

The English language shall be the official language of the United States. As the official language, the English language shall be used for all public acts including every order, resolution, vote or election, and for all records and judicial proceedings of the Government of the United States and the governments of the several States.

The rest of the discussion was only loosely guided by the moderator, who tried to ensure that participants discussed other language issues, such as bilingual ballots, bilingual education, and their more general ideas about what it means to be an American.

Method of Analysis: Each two-hour discussion was tape-recorded and transcribed. The unit of analysis is the “completed thought,” which I define as (a) the comment of one speaker at one time or (b) the minimum amount of comments necessary to communicate the speaker’s main point. Definition (a) was used when a speaker said little and definition (b) was used when a speaker said a lot at once. The dialogue from the transcripts was then divided into two parts. The first part contains general discussions about the nature of American identity (participants were asked questions like “What is it that makes us American?”). The second part consists of opinions toward language policies and how people justify those opinions. The analysis in this paper focuses only on the second part.

There were several steps to the coding procedure.⁹ First, each complete thought was coded as invoking either liberalism, civic republicanism or ethnoculturalism.¹⁰ Next, the liberal, civic republican, and ethnocultural thoughts were subject to a second, more specific round of coding which was designed to capture the particular elements of the broader conception being discussed. These items were arrived at through a combination of *a priori* expectations and a cursory reading

⁸ A Hispanic colleague was the moderator for the Hispanic focus groups, and I was the moderator for the others.

⁹ Three randomly selected transcripts were read to develop of the coding scheme. Both the discourse of the participants and hypotheses derived from theoretical expectations were used in the creation of the coding scheme. Then one transcript was coded to test the appropriateness of the scheme. Revisions were made and another transcript was coded. Final revisions were made and then all transcripts were coded. Four transcripts were double-coded, with 82 percent overall agreement between coders. The coders then discussed points of disagreement and made relevant changes. The revised codings are used in the final analysis.

¹⁰ Other possible codes included: hybrids (combination of liberalism, civic republicanism, or ethnoculturalism), multiculturalism, or assimilationism. There were also three other “overall categories”: one for thoughts too vague to be classified, one for thoughts invoking concrete concerns about taxes or government spending, and one for thoughts offering a conception of national identity that does not fit into any of the other categories (e.g. “When I think of America, I think of crime”). Only liberal, civic republican, and ethnocultural thoughts are analyzed in this paper.

of three randomly selected transcripts. Finally, all thoughts were coded according to which policy, if any, they referred (declaring English the official language, printing election ballots only in English, or bilingual education) and whether the statement was made in support for or opposition to the policy in question.

To be faithful to the dialogue, I also created a code for comments that did not explicitly refer to support for declaring English the official language *per se*, but rather simply expressed support for the idea that everyone in America should speak English. I suspected that people who made such comments would also support making English the official language. Indeed, many participants did not appear to distinguish between the formal pronouncement and the desired condition and thought that the former would promote the latter.¹¹ Despite the overlap between expressed and implicit support for official-English, I chose to code the implicit thoughts as a separate category because the relationship between support for official-English and for the value of speaking English is not one-to-one. It turns out that 60 percent of the participants that expressed the general belief that all Americans should speak English also support making English official. The remaining 40 percent were largely opposed to making English official but argued that everyone should speak English if they want to succeed economically or avoid being discriminated against.

In the end, 34 percent of the thoughts from the focus group discussions explicitly referred to one of the three policy areas and 10 percent mentioned that people in the United States should speak English. Table 1 shows how many statements were made in support for or opposition to each policy as well as those that express ambivalence or no opinion. The policy-related portion of the focus groups was dominated by the official-English question. This was due in part to the design of the interview protocol, which began with a reading of the ELA. As the emphasis of this paper is on how symbolic notions of national identity affect when people are more likely to support or oppose restrictive policies, the analysis presented here concentrates on the 503 thoughts that express a clear preference and the 389 thoughts which argue that everyone in the United States should speak English.

¹¹ The assumption that declaring English the official language would actually lead to more people knowing English was common. The accuracy of this assumption is questionable, but not relevant at this time.

Table 1: Opinion Direction of Completed Thoughts by Policy Type

| <i>Policy</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>Direction</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> |
|--------------------------------|----------|------------------|----------|----------|
| English as Official Language | 938 | support | 226 | 24.1 |
| | | oppose | 213 | 22.7 |
| | | ambivalent | 141 | 15.0 |
| | | no opinion | 358 | 38.2 |
| | | | | 100 |
| English-only Ballots | 101 | support | 34 | 33.7 |
| | | oppose | 30 | 29.7 |
| | | ambivalent | 17 | 16.8 |
| | | no opinion | 20 | 19.8 |
| | | | | 100 |
| Bilingual Education | 231 | support | 12 | 5.2 |
| | | oppose | 52 | 22.5 |
| | | ambivalent | 34 | 14.7 |
| | | no opinion | 133 | 57.6 |
| | | | | 100 |
| Americans Should Speak English | 389 | n.a. | 389 | n.a. |
| Total | 1659 | | 1659 | |

Findings

Table 2 shows the number of thoughts for each broad symbolic category that express support for or opposition to declaring English the official language and printing election ballots only in English. For the participants in the groups, the norms and symbols associated with these conceptions of national identity present a common means of discourse when they offer their views on language issues. These norms and symbols, however, do not consistently lead to either support for or opposition to restrictive language policies; each of the three conceptions of national identity is summoned to justify both positions. Table 2 shows, for example, that 39.82 percent of the thoughts classified as civic republican express support for either English-only ballots or making English the official language while 60.18 percent declare opposition.

Table 2: Thoughts by Type of American Identity and Policy Preference

| | <i>Liberalism</i> | | <i>Republicanism</i> | | <i>Ethnoculturalism</i> | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------|----------|----------------------|----------|-------------------------|----------|
| | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> |
| <i>For Official English</i> | 37 | 60.66 | 34 | 30.09 | 37 | 49.33 |
| <i>For English-only Ballots</i> | 1 | 1.64 | 11 | 9.73 | 2 | 2.67 |
| <i>Total for restrictions</i> | 38 | 62.3 | 45 | 39.82 | 39 | 52 |
| <i>Against Official English</i> | 23 | 37.7 | 48 | 42.48 | 36 | 48 |
| <i>Against English-only Ballots</i> | 0 | 0 | 20 | 17.7 | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Total against restrictions</i> | 23 | 37.7 | 68 | 60.18 | 36 | 48 |
| <i>Total</i> | 61 | 100 | 113 | 100 | 75 | 100 |

Liberalism: Almost 12 percent of all substantive thoughts that refer to any policy in any direction are coded as being liberal. Most of these refer to declaring English the official language. Contrary to expectations, liberal discourse is a prominent player in discussions about the language(s) in which official government business should be conducted and leads to support for official-English more often than it leads to opposition. Yet as expected, the symbols associated with liberalism are not invoked when the focus group participants discuss whether election ballots should be printed only in English. Table 3 lists the different aspects of liberalism that were included in the coding scheme and shows the number of thoughts that invoke each one for each policy position. It shows that participants tend to use the rights-based elements of liberalism to explain opposition to language restrictions while they rely on the economic aspects to justify support. It also shows that concerns about economic success overwhelmingly constitute liberal statements made in support of the notion that people in the United States should speak English. While I had not anticipated the frequency with which liberal concerns would be associated with support for official-English, it is more accurate to say that these concerns are offered as reasons to *not oppose* official-English rather than as reasons to support it. I elaborate on this point below.

Table 3: Liberalism and Language Policy Preferences

| <i>Liberal Categories</i> | <i>Official-English</i> | | <i>English-only Ballots</i> | | <i>All should Know English</i> |
|--|-------------------------|----------------|-----------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------|
| | <i>For</i> | <i>Against</i> | <i>For</i> | <i>Against</i> | |
| Public/Private Distinction | 25 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| English necessary for economic success | 6 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 39 |
| Civil/political rights | 0 | 9 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Freedom | 0 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Obeys laws | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Economic opportunity | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Work ethic | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Majority rule | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Individualism | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Tolerance | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| U.S. as land of plenty | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Rule of law | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Other liberalism or liberal hybrid | 4 | 7 | 1 | 0 | 3 |
| Total | 37 | 23 | 1 | 0 | 51 |

Civil/Political Rights and Freedoms. Though the hypothesis that liberal discourse related to official-English would only explain opposition has proven to be incorrect, the expectation that liberal opposition would be driven by concerns for protecting rights and freedoms was met. As table 3 shows, most liberal thoughts against the ELA objected on the grounds that it would discriminate against ethnic minorities, violate civil rights, or restrict the basic freedoms that Americans are taught to cherish. For example, Joan¹², a woman in a genealogy club, explains that she opposes the ELA because it is reminiscent of the overt discrimination from previous eras. She says, “I think that that particular piece of legislation, the way it’s stated now, sounds kind of discriminatory. It reminds me of the ‘No Irish Need Apply,’ that kind of thing that you saw.” And Andrew, a free-lance journalist, says, “I think there’s a danger there, when zealots get a hold of something like this and start to restrict and restrict. I’m against anything that restricts freedom of speech or expression, in any language, really.” The U.S. is seen as a place where people are more or less free to say what they want without being censored or discriminated against, and some fear that the ELA would violate this sacred image by placing restrictions on the languages in which people communicate. Sixty-one percent of the liberal opposition to official-English was of this flavor.

Economic Success. An aspect of liberalism that was frequently mentioned in support of making English the official language was the desire to structure social relations in a way that would

¹² Names of all participants have been changed.

promote opportunities for economic success. Some participants argued that without a command of the English language, people are not able to take advantage of the economic opportunities that America has to offer. This argument could speak to a more civic republican-based vision of citizenship, particularly if people said that language minorities threaten the stability of the community or fail to meet an obligation of self-sufficiency when they do not achieve economic success (Kymlicka 1994; Mead 1986). But participants who invoke economic success as a reason to support the ELA or assert that everyone in America should know English do so in a purely instrumental fashion, focusing on the individual. They see Americans not as people who have an obligation to be successful but as people who value industry and initiative because of the personal benefits such attributes confer. But the ability to get ahead, they maintain, can only be realized by those who know English.

The argument that knowing English is essential if people living in the United States are to succeed economically accounts 16 percent of liberal thoughts in favor of the ELA, and the extent to which this sentiment was used to argue that people living in America should know English is striking, comprising 76 percent of all liberal thoughts that make this claim.¹³ People who made this argument often stated their case by describing acquaintances whose poor English skills brought hardships or by sharing the success stories of a neighbor, distant relative, or even a hair-stylist who was able to “make it in America” thanks to his or her determination to learn English.

For some people, the strong link between knowing English and economic security is a reason for promoting the learning of English but *not* for supporting the ELA. In fact, among people who oppose official-English laws but say it is important for people living in the U.S. to know English, economic success was the most common reason offered. Again, people often made their case by telling stories of people and places they know. Antonio, a college student who opposes the ELA, describes how economic class and English acquisition go together in the border town where he grew up:

[My city is] about 70 percent Hispanic or Mexican-American...And you have Hispanics of all different levels of the economic spectrum. And I think as you go down, like in income, Hispanics with high income, I think they know less Spanish. And as you keep going down, getting to new immigrants and the ones that earn less, they're the ones who speak Spanish...As you're there longer and the more you succeed, and the English language becomes part of you, you see that that's what's important to survive economically.

Regardless of whether English is the official language, it is clear to Antonio that not knowing English will prevent language minorities from being able to “survive,” let alone be successful. Antonio and others recognize that learning English is beneficial for economic independence but do not necessarily think it requires getting Congress or the Constitution involved. In short, while most of the people who noted the link between English and economic success were supporters of the ELA, opponents did so as well. And they discussed this link in terms of the personal benefits at stake, not in terms of societal obligations.

¹³ Over half of the people who used this justification for everyone knowing English indicated elsewhere that they favor declaring English the official language.

Public vs. Private Regulation. The most common liberal justification for supporting, or rather for not opposing, the ELA is that the proposal would affect only public, not private, interactions. Statements of this nature account for 68 percent of all liberal comments in favor of making English official. Many participants in the study seemed to agree that the language(s) in which private individual concerns are pursued should not be infringed upon by the state and indicated they would oppose the proposal if they thought it would interfere with private relations. An example of this sentiment comes from Mary Jane, a member of a Christian charity group, who says, “I think that if people want to speak their native language in the privacy of their home or in a social gathering or what have you, that would be fine. But as far as anything public, yeah, I think it should be unified in English and English only.”

It is important to highlight that the belief that government should not regulate private interactions was not actually used to say we should *support* making English the official language but was invoked to explain why should *not oppose* it. Is it wrong, then, for me to conclude that this liberal norm can lead to support for official-English? The answer, of course, is yes and no. There is no clear causal relationship between the abstract value and the concrete policy preference. People do not make the nonsensical case that “we need to make English the official language because in this country we do not allow government to interfere in our private affairs.” Rather, they say, “I support the ELA because it applies to public affairs only,” implying that they would have a different preference if they thought the proposed amendment would cross the sacred line between public and private. So while this value does not cause support for the ELA, it makes support possible by providing a universally accepted framework through which people can interpret the debate.

The focus groups reveal that certain aspects of the liberal tradition in America attract people to official-English legislation while others serve as a repellent. On the one hand, participants value the distinctiveness with which Americans publicly abhor discrimination and possess the freedom to express themselves. People who fear that the ELA would encourage encroachments upon these cherished norms are against it. On the other hand, people accept the liberal notion that, by and large, they should be left alone to pursue individual goals. One manifestation of this belief, that government should not regulate private interactions, does not directly cause greater support for official-English, but promotes it by shaping the way people choose to interpret the debate and by making it acceptable for them to advocate language restrictions. Another manifestation, the image of Americans as people who work hard to strive for economic success, is more complicated, leading some to favor the ELA and others to simply advocate knowing English.

Civic Republicanism: The image of the active citizen paying attention to political affairs and working to promote the general welfare is a prominent symbol in American political consciousness. Yet by and large, scholars of public opinion have not explored how this deeply held attachment influences policy preferences. In the focus groups conducted for this study, civic republican concerns account for more policy-related thoughts than either liberalism or ethnoculturalism (17 percent vs. 12 and 11 percent respectively). Moreover, they are invoked in 41 of the 101 statements that deal with printing election ballots only in English. This pattern suggests that the power of the civic republican ideal to affect policy attitudes has indeed been neglected.

Table 4 is similar to table 3 in that it lists the aspects of civic republicanism that were included in the coding scheme and shows the number of thoughts that appeal to each one for each policy position. As with liberalism, multiple aspects of the republican tradition are relevant to debates about language policy. Some emphasize unity and the ability of people to communicate with one another, concerns that generally lead to support for the ELA and for everyone knowing English. Others focus on participation in political and community affairs and do not uniformly lead to a particular policy preference. When people express the desire to maximize both the quantity and quality of participation, they tend to oppose official-English and English-only ballots, but when they only talk about maximizing quality, they voice support.¹⁴ A final, and unanticipated, aspect of civic republicanism that plays a part in determining attitudes on language issues is a preference local control over the decision-making process.

Table 4: Civic Republicanism and Language Policy Preferences

| <i>Civic Republican Categories</i> | <i>Official-English</i> | | <i>English-only Ballots</i> | | <i>All should Know English</i> |
|--|-------------------------|----------------|-----------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------|
| | <i>For</i> | <i>Against</i> | <i>For</i> | <i>Against</i> | |
| Balkanization/Too much diversity | 17 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 18 |
| Being able to communicate | 3 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 42 |
| Isolation from the rest of the community | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 13 |
| Language law is divisive | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Language law would be exclusionary | 0 | 19 | 1 | 9 | 1 |
| Importance of Voting | 0 | 0 | 2 | 7 | 3 |
| Participation/Volunteerism | 0 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 2 |
| Local control over decision-making | 5 | 14 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Responsibilities/Duties of citizens | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 7 |
| Ceremony/Ritual | 0 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Important to feel American | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Self-governance | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Other republicanism or republican hybrid | 8 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 22 |
| Total | 34 | 48 | 11 | 20 | 108 |

Community Cohesion. The focus group data show that people frequently refer to concerns about the community when discussing language, and ethnic change. Some argue that a certain degree of homogeneity is required in order to maintain healthy and well-functioning communities. Others add that the diversity we celebrate in America has gone too far and has resulted in the break-up of social ties. The adjective “balkanized” is frequently used to describe American society. For example, Tim, a 49-year-old free-lance writer, in sorting out the potential benefits and drawbacks of making English official, says, “I think that culturally we’re facing, and I think

¹⁴ The maximization of “quantity” means increasing the sheer number and diversity of people who participate in the political process, and the maximization “quality” means ensuring that people who are involved possess a high degree of political knowledge.

the world is facing, a certain balkanization where people tend to want to stay in their own groups and communicate in their own languages as well, which is, I think, detrimental to...certainly our country, ultimately. So if the intention of this is to try to break that down, perhaps that's a worthy goal." Similarly, Mary Jane, in the Christian charity group, says, "We have such a rich country in people, the diversification of it. But, gee whiz, we need to have something that unifies us." In these examples, concerns about a lack of unity and of a common identity are used to justify the formal recognition of a single national language.

Another common civic republican concern is simply the need to communicate with one another. At its most basic, this concern is practical—a society just cannot function with a multiplicity of languages. A common manifestation of this sentiment is the complaint about driving exams being offered in several languages. For instance, Kate, a member of a business organization, asks, "How can someone go for a driver's test in a different language, yet all of our signs are in English? How about when you've got street names or stop signs that say stop?" Kate was not alone; several people discussed the dangers of having drivers who are not be able to know where they are or understand the rules of the road. It is a matter of safety and of order; a single public language can provide both and thus enhance the well-being of the community.

A loftier version of this theme is that everyone gets along better when they speak the same language, and when they get along better, community life improves. Ernie, for example, member of a public-speaking group, says:

Here in America, most everybody speaks English. For everybody to get along and communicate, everyone should learn English at least. And I feel that there's nothing wrong with having a second language, whatever it is. But for all of us to understand each other, English should be understood by everybody.

The idea that communication is necessary for a sense of unity and harmony is more commonly used to express the belief that everyone should speak English rather than in explicit support of declaring English the official language. But 78 percent of the people who use communication as a reason for everyone knowing English also explicitly support the ELA elsewhere during the discussion. Without a common language, people do not get along, and when people do not get along, the vibrancy of the community suffers. Since vibrant communities are seen as an important part of what American society is all about, people react against their apparent decline by supporting policies that could revive them and thus save the civic republican ideal.

Occasionally, wanting to promote unity and minimize social divisions actually led people to oppose the ELA, but this was relatively rare. One instance comes from Milton, a member of a runner's group, who says, "The biggest problem I have with the English-Firsters, or the ones who want to make it official, is that it's so divisive. [It's] a divisive issue, and that's why my personal vote is that we have to be as little divisive as possible." By and large, however, people who lamented divisiveness in America supported making English the official language. Given the variety of cultures and backgrounds in the U.S., a common language is seen as the minimum amount of—or last chance for—the homogeneity that is necessary to make public life succeed.

Participation. Political participation is essential to the success of self-government according to the civic republican conception of American society. As such, I expected people to think that

policies should be designed so as to make participation possible and meaningful. What this means exactly in terms of support for official-English is not straightforward. My initial hypothesis was that people who talk about participation would oppose official-English policies due to the potential for excluding some members of the polity from community life. I expected people to argue that we should provide services and ballots in several languages to ensure that all citizens can fulfill their civic duty by participating meaningfully since many Americans do not speak English well. It turns out that this hypothesis was only partially borne out in the focus groups. In some cases, an emphasis on the importance of voting and wanting to be sure that everyone can take part in the political process does in fact lead to opposition to official-English and printing election ballots only in English. In other instances, an emphasis on being informed and involved actually leads to support for restrictive policies.

Table 4 shows that civic republican-based opposition to the ELA is in fact fueled mainly by fears that minorities will be excluded from the political process. An example comes from Gloria, a woman who works with the local Hispanic community service organization. She argues, “I’m not for that proposal. And just for the reason that how are people that speak different languages going to understand anything that’s being said as far as the politics or anything else? That’s why I’m against it. Because at some point they need to know what’s going on. And if it’s in English and they don’t understand, they’re basically being sanctioned for it because they don’t know the language.” Gloria knows that people cannot be informed about and involved in their political and social surroundings if they do not speak the language in which the majority of public discourse occurs. Declaring English the official language will make it harder, not easier, for language minorities to be a part of “what’s going on.” This fear of excluding minorities from participating accounts for 40 percent of all republican discourse against the ELA.

So far, the hypothesis that concerns about political participation should lead people to oppose restrictive language policies appears to have some support. Looking at opinions regarding whether election ballots should be printed only in English, however, reveals a more complex scenario. Many statements made against this proposal did follow the anticipated course—fears of excluding ethnic minorities from the political process and general claims about the importance of voting were by far the most common reasons given for opposing English-only ballots. Yet statements of *support* for this policy were also overwhelmingly driven by concerns about general participation in the community and having an informed citizenry. This divergent pattern stems from the alleged long-standing incompatibility in the ideal of a self-governing society between maximizing both the quantity and quality of participation.¹⁵

The following excerpt from a discussion among members in a community service organization illustrates the type of reasoning that I expected to find. The participants here are Dave, Garrett, Alice, and Tom:

Dave: If you think in terms of the computer age that we’re in, it’s not too far-fetched to imagine that you go up to the polling booth and they ask you which language you would like your ballot to be in, you press the button, and boom it can come out in more than 40. So technologically it is becoming possible to [do] something more

¹⁵ Thanks to Tali Mendelberg for helping me to articulate the substance of this pattern.

than just pay attention to the large ethnic subgroups that might be Spanish or might be French or Japanese or Vietnamese.

Garrett: When you install your computer Windows in Word, if you will, in Microsoft, you have your choice of a half dozen languages there that you can press the button and put it into.

Dave: But the point is it would be more important to have every citizen able to make an informed choice and to participate in the voting process. And if you have to do it in multi-language to do that, to make it happen, then I'd be for it.

Alice: Yes. Yes.

Moderator: Other people?

Tom: Say that again, Dave?

Dave: I'd say it's better to have citizens make an informed choice and to participate in the voting process. And if the price we have to pay to do that is to provide the ballots in multiple languages, than I would say we should.

The bottom line here is that political participation is an extremely important act in American society and we should make sure that people can be involved regardless of what language they speak. Dave's emphasis is on the quantity of participation, but he does not see quantity and quality as necessarily in tension. Rather the quality of participation is improved by making information more accessible and encouraging greater involvement.

Cindy, in the group of free-lance writers, shows how the symbol of participatory public life in America can lead to the opposite policy view. She argues that being informed is crucial for meaningful and effective participation, and people cannot be adequately informed without a command of the language since most political discourse in America is in English:

I really do believe that potential for a lot of very horrific things in this country comes from uninformed decisions in the voting booth. And if you can't understand the English language and you can't comprehend what's going on in the news because you don't understand English and you can't read an English newspaper, I do not comprehend how you'll be able to make an informed decision at a voting booth.

According to this reasoning, people must know English to participate because that is the language in which political debate in this country occurs. When people who are not able to follow mainstream political discourse try to have a say at the ballot box, the sanctity of the voting process is tarnished and the decisions that are made could be harmful. Both sets of viewpoints reveal a belief in the civic republican call for citizens who are both informed and involved. For people like Cindy, increasing involvement means allowing uninformed people to take part, a possibility that offends their notion of a participatory system of government. They fear that providing bilingual voting materials would make more people involved but not necessarily more informed, a combination worse than the status quo of having language-minority citizens who are both uninformed and uninvolved. For people like Dave, the civic republican call

for a participatory society requires us to promote quantity along with quality, and a greater amount of participation would simply be a by-product of the actions taken to improve quality.

Local Control. A third civic republican concern that featured prominently in the focus group discussions is the notion that certain issues should be left to communities to settle on their own. This argument was a common justification for opposing the ELA as people argued that no single policy is right for every locality. This sentiment appeals to the notion of active citizens deliberating and debating over which policies will foster the public good in their community, and accounts for 29 percent of civic republican thoughts against the ELA.

An example comes from a woman in a business group. Her peers say that although providing government services in other languages sounds like a good idea in principle, there are so many language minorities in the U.S. that it could really get out of hand. When asked “Where do you draw the line?” Alicia responds, “Let each region, state, county, whatever, decide where to draw the line. Obviously, in Florida, Spanish has become the predominant language in many areas. Probably Piscataway [in New Jersey] has a high Hispanic population. . . . So let each locality determine what needs to happen.” Note she does not say that she sees anything wrong with mainly English-speaking communities deciding to provide materials and services in English only. Rather, there are many places in the U.S. where such a policy might not be the best course of action so the most appropriate approach is to let individual communities decide on the language(s) in which government business will be conducted.¹⁶

The above quotes and figures from the content analysis demonstrate that the notion of an active and informed citizenry resonates with many of the participants in the study. They have an image of Americans attending political rallies, pulling levers in voting booths, and being a part of the governing process. Yet the widespread attachment to this ideal vision does not result in a consensus regarding public policies designed to address language issues and the incorporation of language minorities into the political process. For some, this image cannot be sustained if public discourse is not conducted with one common language. For others, the image falls apart if the outlets for participation, by design, restrict involvement. This complex relationship between civic republicanism and policy preferences substantiates my claim that the civic republican tradition of American identity deserves more attention in public opinion research.¹⁷

Ethnoculturalism: That the United States has a legacy of using ascriptive characteristics to determine who is and is not an American citizen has been well documented. Although many of the ideas underlying that legacy have faded from mainstream political discourse, the notion that certain immutable characteristics constitute American identity is still widely held. While few people will agree with statements that are overtly racist, many do not see ethnic minorities as Americans. They possess static definitions of American national identity that do not adapt to the

¹⁶ On August 4, 1999, the city of El Cenizo, Texas, a city where over 60 percent of the residents speak little or no English, declared Spanish the official language for public city business. Advocates say that the ordinance is intended to connect residents with the local government and “snap the population out of its political lethargy” (McLemore 1999). It would be interesting to hear what the supporters of “local control” over the decision-making in this policy area would have to say about this recent development.

¹⁷ There were also several thoughts coded as “other republican,” from which no dominant pattern emerged. Some mentioned that learning English is a show of hospitality; others felt that allowing other languages in public discourse makes political corruption more likely; still others involved the expression of multiple ideals at once.

changing reality of the demographic make-up of the United States population. Along these lines, many members of minority groups do not think of themselves as being American because they do not fit that static image.

Ethnocultural discourse accounts for 11 percent of all policy-related thoughts. Table 5 shows the different ethnocultural sentiments that were included in the coding scheme along with the number of thoughts that invoke each one for each policy view. The hypotheses regarding how ethnocultural symbols of American identity influence language policy preferences seem to hold. Some participants justify support for the ELA by invoking this unfortunate American tradition while others explain opposition by condemning it. People tend to favor making English the official language when they think that there is something special about the English language or when they see ethnic minorities as not being real Americans. They tend to oppose it when they disapprove of the ethnocultural tendencies of their fellow Americans and fear that this proposal will encourage them. It also turns out that ethnocultural themes were not invoked when participants debated the merits and drawbacks of English-only election ballots. The concerns that this policy raises fall squarely within the realm the civic republicanism.

Table 5: Ethnoculturalism and Language Policy Preferences

| <i>Ethnocultural Categories</i> | <i>Official-English</i> | | <i>English-only Ballots</i> | | <i>All should Know English</i> |
|---|-------------------------|----------------|-----------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------|
| | <i>For</i> | <i>Against</i> | <i>For</i> | <i>Against</i> | |
| English as American | 23 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 26 |
| Nostalgia/"good" vs. "bad" immigrants | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 18 |
| Minorities as not American | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 10 |
| Anti-immigrant sentiments | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| Blames immigrants for their "station" | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Ascriptiveness of American identity | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| Critical of ethnocultural tendencies in America | 0 | 11 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Language law is ethnocultural | 0 | 23 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Need to fight ethnoculturalism | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Not American b/c not white and blonde | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Other ethnoculturalism or ethnocultural hybrid | 4 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| Total | 37 | 36 | 2 | 0 | 69 |

English is American. The most common ethnocultural idea invoked to express support for making English the official language was that the English language is an integral part of American identity. More than asserting the virtues of having a common language, these statements reflected an adoration of English in particular. This attachment to the English language as a symbol of American identity constitutes 62 percent of all ethnocultural comments made in support of official-English and 38 percent of all ethnocultural thoughts claiming that people living in the U.S. should speak English.¹⁸ A common example of this type of sentiment comes from Jacob, a member of the runner’s group, who said, “If they’re going to live here, they

¹⁸ Note that 90 percent of the participants who used the centrality of English to American identity to argue that everyone in America should know English also supported the ELA elsewhere.

should speak our language, the language.” Josie, a member of the public-speaking group, also thinks that we should make English official because it would re-affirm her image of who Americans are. She says, “When in Rome, you do as the Romans do. You join a country. You participate in its culture. We cannot deny that we are a culture of English speaking people.” In order to sustain the integrity of our national identity, some feel that we need not only a common language, but to have English as that language.

Nostalgia/Good vs. Bad Immigrants. Another way people expressed support for the ELA and for everyone knowing English was to compare what they consider to be good immigrants with bad immigrants, or rather, those who know English with those who do not. Often, people recalled the good old days when their grandparents came through Ellis Island and worked hard at becoming American. They regret that those days are gone and lament that today’s immigrants are of a different breed. These types of comparisons make up 14 percent of ethnocultural thoughts in favor of the ELA and 26 percent of ethnocultural thoughts arguing for everyone to know English.¹⁹

For example, Merle, a member of an antique car club, is critical of immigrant groups whose members do not know English and he compares them to what he says immigrants used to be like. He says, “My grandmother spoke mostly Italian but your children, you told ‘em, ‘It’s so important to learn the English language,’ [and] I don’t see that today... With some groups it’s like, ‘Well, why should I *have to* do it?’” Bill, one of Merle’s colleagues in the car club, echoes this critique and adds, “One of the big differences that I see is the attitude of the people today... In a lot of cases today, the parents do not encourage the children.” Bill and Merle feel that language minorities today have gone astray. Unlike minorities from previous eras, today they no longer recognize the importance of knowing English and are failing their children. One reason we have so many language minorities in America, they argue, is because of a change in attitude to one which indicates that immigrants lack the aspirations that people like Bill and Merle feel Americans should have.

Minorities as not American/Anti-immigrant Sentiments. Another ethnocultural theme that people employed to voice support for the ELA was the tendency to describe ethnic minorities, as a group, as being foreigners or not American. In a similar vein, ethnocultural support for English as the official language sometimes emerged in statements that were blatantly anti-immigrant. Such statements were not especially common, but were marked by a noticeable lack of self-censorship. An example comes from John, in the antique car club, who said that new immigrants would oppose the ELA because they are lazy. This combination of images—minorities as not American and immigrants as unwanted—is similar to the images described in the previous section but is more straightforward in the way it reveals a belief that some people are just not able to be as American as others. Seventeen percent of all ethnocultural thoughts invoke these notions to either support making English the official language or say that people living in America should know English.²⁰

¹⁹ All participants who said everyone in America should know English because that’s what their ancestors did and what other good immigrants do also supported the ELA elsewhere in the discussions or on the pre-survey.

²⁰ Again, all participants who used these ethnocultural images to argue that everyone in America should know English also supported the ELA elsewhere in the discussions or on the pre-survey.

Shelly, a member of a gardening club, reveals the implicit assumption that language minorities are not American when she complains about hearing other languages around town:

There are a lot of people that don't speak good English, or understandable English, in the trades here. And as a native American, it's difficult sometimes when you go into a place and you don't understand what the person is saying, in your own country...I don't understand it. And, I mean, this is my country, and English is my language, and yet I have to deal with people who do not speak it so that I can understand what they're saying.

She feels that people who do not speak English or who have accents that make their English difficult to understand are not respecting that they are guests in her home. It does not enter her consciousness that they might be citizens and that the country might be their home as well. An even more incisive attack comes from Leslie, a member of a business group, who not only disparages minorities for not knowing English, but also suggests they are actually faking it:

Twenty years ago I never thought in a million years I'd be talking like this. If half the people who claim they don't know how to speak English were put in the situation where they had to speak English to save their lives, watch how quickly the English would come pouring out. Forgive me, God. I never thought I'd become one of these people.

When probed as to why people would not use English even though they really know it, she replied, "They don't want to... They're learning that if they continue not to want to speak English, we will accommodate them," implying that language minorities have us duped and lawmakers have been taken for a ride to subsidize this lazy and un-American lifestyle.

Critiques of Ethnoculturalism. Not all people who incorporate the language of ethnoculturalism into their vocabulary do so as a show of endorsement. Many are critical of America's ethnocultural legacy, and objections to this tradition were common reasons for being against the ELA. Not surprisingly, anti-ethnocultural statements account for all ethnocultural discourse that opposed official-English legislation. This type of opposition was not confined to the Hispanic participants; half of the people who relied on anti-ethnocultural sentiments to voice their opposition to the ELA were non-Hispanic whites.

Anna, a member of a Hispanic community service organization, lashed out against the potential for this law to reinforce a particular caricature of Americans:

I think [this law] sends the message to the country that we are all one people, that we are all English speaking, and by that I think there is a hidden message that we are all white, that we are all one culture...I think it just sends the message that we are one people, disregarding everybody else, that we're one big, white, conservative America. That's what we say when we say we're only going to speak English.

Cheryl, a member of a historical society, offers a tamer angle on the same theme. She says, "I feel that there's something about this legislation that implies a threat and not only a threat but an implied message that America is for Americans...I think there is an underlying anti-not-born-in-this-country implication in that legislation and that I really disagree with." Here the language issue being framed through ethnocultural imagery and opposition is situated within that frame by the refusal to accept its narrow definition of who does and does not belong.

It would be misleading to say that certain aspects of the ethnocultural tradition lead people to support official-English legislation while other aspects lead to opposition. The defining element of ethnoculturalism—the existence of an ascriptive basis for national identity—is central to both policy preferences. The main difference between those who use ethnoculturalism for support and those who use it for opposition is whether they endorse or reject it. Endorsement is usually implicit; people who make ethnocultural comments in support of the ELA and who argue that all people living in the U.S. should know English never actually say that certain groups of people cannot be considered American. But by referring to people with poor English skills as guests in the native English speakers’ land or by castigating newcomers for not being more like an idealized image of “the good immigrant,” people reveal that they simply do not see language minorities as Americans. Having an accent makes one a foreigner, and it does not occur to some participants to distinguish between ethnic minorities who are and are not American citizens.

Conversely, people who use ethnoculturalism to voice opposition to the ELA do not mince their words. They are outspoken about their objection to the stereotypical American and about their fears that making English official would only serve to burn that image into the American psyche even more so than it already is.²¹ The people who made these statements do not accept that Americans are white English-speaking Protestants of Anglo-Saxon descent but the existence of this conception of American identity provides a framework through which they interpret the merits and dangers of the ELA.

Summary and Conclusion

The three conceptions of American national identity under investigation in this study—liberalism, civic republicanism, and ethnoculturalism—provide cognitive tools for Americans to interpret the issues that arise from ethnic change in the U.S. The ideas associated with these conceptions featured prominently when participants in the focus groups explained their attitudes toward restrictive language policies. People support the ELA and printing election ballots only in English if these policies are seen as a way to promote either economic self-sufficiency, a greater sense of national and local unity, or a common basis for communication. Similarly, if people feel that the U.S. is too balkanized, that uninformed people threaten the integrity the voting process, that the English language is an integral part of American identity, or that today’s immigrants are a “let down”, they are more likely to support restrictive policies. That the proposed legislation is not seen as crossing the sacred line between public and private also provides a way for people to express their support for the ELA. Alternatively, people are more likely to oppose restrictive policies if they fear that these laws will violate civil rights, exclude minorities from the political process, or explicitly promote the idea that Americans should all look and sound alike. People also oppose the ELA when they feel that language conflicts should be dealt with on a community-by-community basis.

This analysis demonstrates that enduring conceptions of what it means to be an American shape how people interpret public policies that address issues of language and immigration, but that the relationship between identity and opinion is not as straightforward as previous research would

²¹ Although concerns that are more appropriately labeled as liberal are in some cases behind anti-ethnocultural sentiments, such as fears of discrimination or violating rights, the thoughts described here are couched in the language of ethnoculturalism. To be faithful to the dialogue, unless the speaker specifically mentioned phrases like “discrimination” and “rights,” these thoughts were coded as being anti-ethnocultural rather than liberal.

suggest. When researchers use a one-dimensional measure of American identity that consists of liberal norms at one end and ethnocultural or racist ones at the other, the effects of important traditions in American political thought, such as civic republicanism, are ignored. Moreover, the liberal and civic republican conceptions of American identity are internally conflictual, and ethnoculturalism is contested. These tensions have been overlooked by more traditional survey-based analyses.

The complex relationship between conceptions of national identity and opinions recalls Elder and Cobb, who write that to understand the political importance of cultural symbols, it is necessary to examine “the way they are used and how people relate to them” because “the meaning of the message is heavily colored by the significance to the receiver of the symbols involved and his or her own interpretation of their meaning” (Elder and Cobb 1983: 9-10). The result of such an examination is a more accurate assessment of how symbolic conceptions of American identity shape opinions about policies that claim to facilitate the incorporation of new members into the dominant social and political order.

The analysis presented here also points to some observations worthy of future investigation. One is that similar policies should not necessarily be lumped together in a single analysis. As opinion data have shown, people are more likely to support the general idea of declaring English the official language than they are of English-only ballots. This discrepancy is consistent across surveys and appears in the focus groups as well.²² Further, the factors that drive support for one policy may differ from the factors that drive support for another. Two seemingly similar policies can have different levels and *causes* of support among the public. As tables 3 through 5 show, the issue of bilingual ballots does not elicit either the liberal or ethnocultural conceptions of national identity. The cognitive link between ballots and participation is strictly civic republican in nature. In short, the considerations that influence preferences will vary even though the policies being examined are derived from a common political issue.

Of course, these three traditions do not exhaust the conceptions of American identity that influence language policy preferences. The focus groups provided a total of 503 completed thoughts that expressly stated either support for or opposition to declaring English the official language and printing election materials only in English. Only 249 of these thoughts were coded as being pure expressions of liberal, civic republican, or ethnocultural symbols, leaving 254 thoughts that either blend aspects of these three, tap into alternative images of national identity, like multiculturalism, or do not invoke conceptions of national identity, suggesting that the utility of Smith’s framework is limited. How these hybrid and alternative expressions of national identity influence language policy preferences should also be the subject of future research.

²² See, for example, the 1992 National Election Study and the 1994 General Social Survey.

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