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Author(s): Deborah J. Schildkraut

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American Identity and Attitudes Toward Official-English Policies

Deborah J. Schildkraut

Department of Politics, Oberlin College

This article analyzes the relationship between each of three conceptions of American identity—liberalism, civic republicanism, and ethnoculturalism—and support for declaring English the official language and printing election ballots only in English. Focus group discussions showed that these conceptions provide a common means of discourse for talking about language conflicts and ethnic change, and that the civic republican conception of American identity is a particularly important factor in the opinion formation process. Although all three conceptions help people to decide whether they think English should be the official language, they are not consistently associated with support for or opposition to restrictive language policies. How individuals interpret these images of national identity also shapes the direction of their preferences.

KEY WORDS: symbolic politics, national identity, language policy, focus groups

The ethnic makeup of the U.S. population has undergone dramatic changes over the past 40 years. From the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s, levels of immigration rose steadily, as did the proportion of immigrants arriving from Latin American and Asian countries. The federal government estimates that the foreign-born now constitute about 10% of the population, up from 5% in 1970 (Schmidley, 2001). Several public policy issues have gained prominence in response to these demographic changes, including bilingual education, immigration laws, border enforcement, official-English laws, and the provision of public services to immigrants.

All levels of government have been faced with the challenge of developing appropriate policies to help immigrants adapt and become full members of the community. Policies that deal with language have become both common and contentious, and debates about how to respond to the presence of limited-English-speaking residents and citizens have become an important feature of American

political discourse. As of this writing, for example, all but seven states have declared English the official state language or have debated doing so in the past few years.¹ The federal government, states, cities, and the courts have all seen increasing numbers of language-related issues appear on their agendas. Accordingly, political scientists have begun to examine how Americans feel about issues that arise from ethnic change.

Research that seeks to explain the widespread public support for restrictive language and immigration policies has found that 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, whereas factors such as partisanship and income are more erratic (Citrin & Duff, 1998; Citrin, Green, Muste, & Wong, 1997; Citrin, Reingold, & Green, 1990; Espenshade & Calhoun, 1993; Espenshade & Hempstead, 1996; Frendreis & Tatalovich, 1997; Hood & Morris, 1997; Hood, Morris, & Shirkey, 1997; Huddy & Sears, 1995; Vidanage & Sears, 1995). The work presented here stems from this research.

The conceptions of American identity at the heart of this endeavor are modeled after Smith's (1988, 1993, 1997) tripartite description of American national identity, consisting of liberalism, civic republicanism, and ethnoculturalism. Smith's treatment of American identity encompasses a broader range of concerns than is typically included in public opinion surveys. In developing each component as a distinct tradition with its own intellectual and legal history, Smith avoided placing these three traditions along a single dimension with liberal norms at one end and ethnocultural or racist beliefs at the other. Smith established that these three traditions have shaped how American identity has been defined over the years, and previous symbolic politics analyses have established that this type of cultural commodity shapes opinions. Additional research demonstrating the power of elites to shape popular understandings of political realities (e.g., Edelman, 1985; Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000) further suggests that using Smith's model in public opinion analyses of language policy is worthwhile. Smith's work, therefore, is valuable to the research at hand, even though his project centers on elite rhetoric and behavior rather than on public opinion. Here, his conceptions of American identity are used to enrich our understanding of the opinion forma-

¹ The following websites provide useful information about official-English legislation: English-First (<http://www.englishfirst.org/efstates.htm>), U.S. English Inc. (<http://www.us-english.org/inc/official/states.asp>), and James Crawford (<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/jwccrawford/langleg.htm#stateleg>). The seven states that have not recently considered making English the official state language are Delaware, Michigan, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas, and Vermont. Note, however, that the Texas legislature considered, and rejected, an official-English bill in the 1980s (Tatalovich, 1995). There is some debate over whether English is in fact the official language of Massachusetts and Louisiana. In the absence of concrete guidance over classification, I count both among the states that have official-English laws, and I welcome arguments in either direction.

tion process regarding the increasingly prominent and contentious issues of declaring English the official language and printing election ballots only in English.

Symbols, Identity, and Language

Edelman (1985) and Elder and Cobb (1983) wrote that political 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 make the complex seem simple and provide prescriptions for bringing order to a disorderly 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. Conceptions of American identity provide one set of such symbolic predispositions. They help people to locate themselves within the polity and are often intricately tied to an individual's sense of self. Moreover, conceptions of American identity are uniquely implicated in the domain of language and immigration policy.

A central theme of Elder and Cobb's argument is that if a given symbol is to take on a functional role in society, there must be a consensus that the symbol is important, but 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. They wrote:

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. (Elder & Cobb, 1983, p. 10)

For example, two 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 indeed shape policy preferences in this issue area (Citrin &

Duff, 1998; Citrin et al., 1990; Espenshade & Calhoun, 1993; Frensdreis & Tatalovich, 1997; Huddy & Sears, 1995; Vidanage & Sears, 1995). Yet I argue that these studies are limited in three respects. 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.

Second, these studies 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 civic republican ideals always lead one to support restrictive policies. Framing, context, and interpretation should all play a part in whether and how different components of national identity affect opinion formation. Moreover, a more detailed approach would allow scholars to study opposition to restrictive policies directly, rather than forcing them to rely on the assumption that opposition results from an absence of the factors that drive support. For example, American society is popularly defined by an unparalleled amount of freedom. For some people, making English the official language could be seen as a violation of certain freedoms and thus would pose a threat to their conception of American national identity. This motivation is missed by studies that begin from the assumption that opposition to official English is simply the result of a lack of ascriptive definitions of national identity.

Finally, existing research does not explicitly address the extent to which the role of symbolic predispositions varies across issue type.² For example, if the debate on a particular policy is not framed in liberal terms, then liberal ideals might not come into play despite their centrality to definitions of "Americanness." In short, the literature establishes that conceptions of American identity matter in the opinion formation process, but it does not specify *which* conceptions matter (in engendering attitudes of either support or opposition), nor does it address when other influences on attitudes may eclipse the role of national identity.

Conceptions of Identity

To address these limitations, I turn to Smith's (1997) work on citizenship policy in the United States which shows that liberalism, civic republicanism, and ethnoculturalism constitute civic myths that have at different times, and often simultaneously, determined who is and is not considered an American. Given the powerful role these traditions have played at the elite level throughout American

² Although few studies examine patterns of variation across issue type [Citrin et al. (1990) is an exception], some patterns can be gleaned through comparisons across studies.

history, it is likely that regular Americans identify with them and use them to navigate the political and social world. The use of these three traditions in focus group research confronts the three limitations described above: It provides for a broader, and possibly more accurate, model of how people think about American identity; it allows for each conception to drive opinions in either direction; and it can account for varying levels of influence, depending on how particular policies are framed.

Liberalism. 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 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” with liberalism with regard to 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. This is not to say that liberalism does not address interactions among citizens and governments. Rather, it emphasizes the individual and limits the demands that the state can make on its people. As such, people might not find liberal prescriptions all that useful when considering mandating a single public language. Perhaps language issues will not prime the sorts of concerns we associate with liberalism, such as individual autonomy, economic freedom, and rule of law. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that liberalism will not play a large role in discussions of language policies and that when it does, it will be associated with opposition to official-language laws, with people arguing that such laws violate freedom of speech or other rights and liberties.³

Civic republicanism. Whether liberalism has a singular hold on the American ideological psyche has been a matter of much debate. An alternative, proposed not in place of but rather in addition to liberalism, is civic republicanism (e.g., Appleby, 1986; Banning, 1986). 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 case, individual citizens value the collective good over personal 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

³ Frensdreis and Tatalovich (1997) found that support for treating all people equally does not influence attitudes toward official-English policies.

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. 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 (Barber, 1984; Conover, Crewe, & Searing, 1991).

The civic republican tradition speaks to the concerns raised by debates about language policy more clearly than does the liberal tradition. 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 restrictive language policies. Yet interpretations of how these symbols lead to a well-functioning community of informed and involved citizens can vary, such that some people may be led to favor English-only policies and others to oppose them. When people fear that Americans do not have enough in common, they are likely to be in favor of regulating language use. Such beliefs might manifest themselves in the argument that a socially homogeneous populace is necessary for creating conditions that allow Americans to live up to the civic republican ideal. Alternatively, when people emphasize the importance of having an informed and involved citizenry, they should be more likely to oppose official-English laws. This view might lead to the argument that all citizens need to be allowed to participate meaningfully in the political process regardless of what language they speak.

Ethnoculturalism. Ethnoculturalism is the belief that certain ascriptive or immutable characteristics delineate American identity. 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 nature, but simply believing in liberty and freedom has often not been enough to qualify people as American. As Smith (1997) pointed out, for much of America’s history, a majority of the population was denied citizenship because of race, gender, or original nationality. Smith argued that ethnoculturalism is not an aberration, but rather a full-fledged conception of American identity in its own right. Unlike liberalism and civic republicanism, however, it is rare to see ethnoculturalism explicitly endorsed. Still, implicit or subtle references to the idea that certain ascriptive characteristics define American-ness are still common. For example, in the 1996 General Social Survey (GSS), 55% of the respondents said that being a Christian is either somewhat or very important in making someone a true American, and 70% said the same about being born in America.

Because this image is clearly implicated in language debates, ethnocultural themes should 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.⁴ Along these lines, many people are critical of America's legacy of treating its non-white or non-English-speaking residents worse than their white and English-speaking counterparts. People 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. Endorsement should be associated with support for official English, whereas rejection should be associated with opposition.

It is important to note, however, that support for official-English laws does not necessarily imply an adherence to ethnoculturalism. Official-English legislation consistently enjoys widespread support among the American people; in the 1994 GSS, for example, 60% of respondents supported making English the official language of the country. This high level of support remains substantial across the traditional political and social cleavages along which competing interests in America normally divide. Certainly there would be benefits to having everyone in a society speak the same language. For instance, having a common public language facilitates political participation and fosters a public sphere where citizens can debate over public policy in an efficient manner. At the same time, supporting official-English laws is often cast as irrational or nativist, although such condemnation is at best premature. In this sense, one of the underlying motivations of this project is to determine how much of this support is driven by the explicit or implicit belief that only people with certain cultural backgrounds can be American, and how much of it is about wanting the benefits of having a common language used in the public sphere. People frequently rely on the questionable assumption that official-English laws will actually promote the learning of English. Why they think so is a question to be pursued elsewhere, but agreeing that all Americans should know English is not in and of itself a sign of sinister motives.

Data and Methods

Focus Group Uses, Abuses, and Procedures

To substantiate the arguments described above and to stimulate a discussion of survey construct development, I conducted a series of focus groups in New Jersey in 1998. Although still not common in social science research, focus groups are becoming more accepted as a way to research and analyze public opinion. One valuable feature is that they give participants the opportunity to answer the questions of interest in their own words rather than constrain them to a structure imposed by a fixed set of survey responses. Among the many reasons why one

⁴ Citrin and Duff (1998) showed that an ethnocultural conception of American identity leads to hostility toward immigrants and support for immigration restrictions.

might opt for focus groups, perhaps the most basic is that more traditional means (e.g., 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 (1995) wrote, "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" (p. 39).

Previous surveys have rarely, if ever, included questions on language policy together with questions on alternative conceptions of national identity. Further, people are not regularly called upon to discuss American identity or the role of English in American society, and when they are asked to do so, they will likely find the task difficult. Most Americans are socialized to have certain beliefs about what America stands for, and they carry these beliefs 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. In short, using focus groups for this project provides data that are otherwise unavailable and yields insights that more traditional means of opinion analysis cannot. This is not to say that surveys on these matters are not valuable. Rather, it is often the case that more attention needs to be paid to designing survey questions, and both sources of data can complement each other by allowing different types of analyses for the same phenomenon.⁵

As with any research method, focus groups have drawbacks. One is lack of generalizability: Conclusions drawn from focus groups are not as generalizable as those drawn from a national sample, because the sample size is small and recruitment rarely uses random sampling. To avoid severe atypicality, researchers often conduct several focus groups (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1996). A related problem is that replication is not possible with focus group research. Replication, however, becomes less valuable if the method that allows it (e.g., surveys) does not address the substantive questions of interest.

Another possible problem is that the comments of the most colorful and articulate respondents may draw undue attention. This concern can be addressed through comprehensive approaches such as content analysis. By counting the frequency of the concepts, words, or conversational patterns of interest, all statements are included in the analysis, not just the most quotable. One worry with content analysis is that not every speaker has a chance to respond to the same set

⁵ One-on-one interviews may also be an appropriate alternative in some instances. Although there is no consensus or solid empirical evidence about how the findings or the data differ when interviews are used instead of focus groups, there are some important differences between these approaches (Morgan, 1997). For instance, focus groups allow for a larger sample size, which in turn allows for comparisons across groups or across different types of people to an extent that interview samples do not. Focus groups also permit the social nature of opinion formation to be examined.

of issues (Sigel, 1996). Each group emphasizes different aspects of the overall topic, and even within groups, some people do not get a chance to comment on certain facets of the debate. Thus, quantification might not provide a complete portrayal of the extent to which certain beliefs exist among the participants. However, in defense of quantification, Gamson (1992) wrote:

[The numbers] are intended to provide information on the robustness of any given result. They tell us whether what is said is consensual, appearing independently of the race and gender composition of the groups; whether it is a majority view in groups of different types or restricted to a particular type; whether it occurs in a minority of groups but is not a rarity or an idiosyncratic expression of a few unusual ones; or, whether it never appears at all. These are important differences even if one takes the exact numbers with a grain of salt. (p. 191)

Content analysis is also a reasonable approach when there are a priori expectations about what topics participants will raise. Although content analysis of transcripts may not capture every concept relevant to the issue under discussion, it does allow examination of whether theoretically driven expectations are at work while also providing opportunities to discover unanticipated relationships and to speculate about survey design.

The large number of groups in my study (14), combined with the a priori expectations about the roles different concepts of American identity will play in discussions about language policy, makes me confident that content analysis is an appropriate strategy. I am interested in the spontaneously generated reasons for why people hold certain opinions on restrictive language policies. Frequency counts allow me to see which types of justifications come up most often and in which direction. Using a quantitative approach does not pretend to cover all possible influences on policy preferences, nor does it imply that people who do not voice a particular argument do not share the same feelings as those who do. It only reveals how many people voice particular concerns with respect to national identity and language legislation, and how often they do so.⁶

Participants 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 consisted of 14 groups in which most participants within each group had a prior acquaintance with one another. To minimize pressures for social desirability, I wanted each group to be ethnically homogeneous and to consist only of U.S. citizens. In the end, three groups were entirely Hispanic, eight were entirely white

⁶ For more on advantages and disadvantages of focus groups, see Delli Carpini and Williams (1994), Gamson (1992), Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995), Morgan (1997), and Sigel (1996).

(non-Hispanic), and the remaining three groups were ethnically heterogeneous;⁷ all but two participants were citizens. There were five “hobby” clubs (cars, gardening, dance, genealogy, and running), three community service or charity organizations (one of which serves the Trenton Hispanic community), two business organizations for women, a group of freelance writers, a public-speaking group, a historical society, and a Chicano culture organization.

The mean number of participants per group was 8 (range, 5 to 12), and the total number of persons interviewed was 108. The sample was disproportionately female (69%) because many local community groups were for women only; and in some of the mixed-sex groups, only women agreed to participate. A pre-discussion questionnaire was used to gather demographic information and baseline opinions on language policy. Participants ranged from 18 to 74 years old (mean = 47), the mean household income was between \$50,000 and \$60,000, and most considered themselves to be middle-of-the-road politically. Before the discussion, 51% supported declaring English the official language of the United States and 36% favored printing election ballots only in English.⁸

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.⁹ HJ Res 37 was introduced in 1997 (105th Congress); the proposed amendment was first introduced in 1981 (97th Congress) and has been reintroduced in every Congress since. 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.

Method of Analysis

Each 2-hour discussion was tape-recorded and transcribed. The unit of analysis was the “completed thought,” which I define as (1) the comments of one speaker at one time or (2) the minimum amount of comments necessary to com-

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

⁸ Demographic comparisons between this sample and New Jersey, and between this sample and the United States, are available from the author upon request.

⁹ A colleague from Puerto Rico moderated the Hispanic focus groups; I moderated the others.

municate the speaker's main point. Definition 1 was used when a speaker said little, and definition 2 was used when a speaker said a lot at once.¹⁰ Next, the dialogue from the transcripts was divided into two parts: general discussions about American identity (participants' responses concerning what makes us American), and opinions on language policies and how people justify those opinions. The analysis here focuses only on the second portion of the transcripts.¹¹

There were several steps to the coding procedure. First, each completed thought was coded as invoking liberalism, civic republicanism, ethnoculturalism, incorporationism (that the United States is "a nation of immigrants"), or a conceptual hybrid. There were also four other coding options at this stage: concrete concerns about taxes or government spending, conceptions of national identity that do not fit into any of the other categories (e.g., "When I think of America, I think of crime"), too vague to be classified (e.g., "Being American means believing in certain ideals"), and statements that did not reference a conception of American identity (e.g., "I'm in favor of the ELA because the best way to learn the language is to do everything in English"). Next, the liberal, civic republican, and ethnocultural thoughts were subjected to a second, more specific round of coding 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 of three randomly selected transcripts. Finally, all thoughts were coded according to which policy, if any, they referred (declaring English the official language or printing election ballots only in English) and whether the statement was made in support for or opposition to the policy in question.¹² Four transcripts were double-coded, with 82% overall agreement between coders.¹³

I also created a code for comments that did not explicitly support declaring English the official language per se, but rather 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

¹⁰ The mean number of substantive completed thoughts per group was 268, with a minimum of 167 and maximum of 531 (531 is an outlier; the second highest number of substantive completed thoughts is 340). The number of completed thoughts does not vary systematically according to the ethnic or gender makeup of the group.

¹¹ General questions about American identity were asked *after* participants discussed their views on official English.

¹² Three randomly selected transcripts were read to develop the coding scheme. Both the discourse of the participants and hypotheses derived from theoretical expectations were used in its creation. 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. Coding instructions and a moderator question guide are available from the author upon request.

¹³ The coders then discussed points of disagreement and made relevant changes. The revised codings are used in the final analysis.

Table 1. Opinion Direction of Completed Thoughts by Policy Type

Policy	<i>N</i>	%	Direction	<i>N</i>	%
English as official language	439	49.2	Support	226	51.5
			Oppose	213	48.5
English-only ballots	64	7.2	Support	34	53.1
			Oppose	30	46.9
Americans should speak English	389	43.6	—	389	100
Total	892	100			

latter. Despite the overlap between expressed and implicit support for official English, I coded 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% of the participants who expressed the general belief that all Americans should speak English also supported making English official. The remaining 40% were opposed to, or unsure about, official English but still argued that everyone in the United States should speak English.

Table 1 shows how many statements were made in support for and in opposition to each policy.¹⁴ Most of the policy-related portion of the focus groups addressed the official-English question, due in part to the design of the interview protocol, which began with a reading of the ELA. Also, debates about both policies often shifted to discussions of why it is important to know English in the United States, hence the high percentage of thoughts in the last row.

Findings and Interpretations

The same 892 completed thoughts presented in Table 1 are categorized in Table 2 according to the conception of American identity they invoked. More than half of the discourse is accounted for by Smith's tripartite model, with civic republicanism being the most common tradition, although liberalism and ethnoculturalism are not far behind. The proportion of the discourse accounted for by this model is even higher when "hybrid" statements (which involve invoking two or more traditions within a single thought) are taken into account. These hybrid thoughts reflect, as Smith (1993) noted, that "[al]though Americans have often struggled over contradictions among these traditions, almost all have tried to embrace what they saw as the best features of each" (p. 550). How people reconcile the array of competing and complementary concerns derived from alter-

¹⁴ Thoughts that express ambivalence or no opinion were coded separately and are not included in this analysis.

Table 2. Policy-Related Thoughts Expressing an Opinion by Conception of American Identity

Conception of American identity	<i>N</i>	%
Liberalism	112	12.6
Civic republicanism	221	24.8
Ethnoculturalism	144	16.1
Incorporationism	36	4.0
Hybrid	110	12.3
Tax/spend	22	2.5
Other	1	0.1
Unclassified	147	16.5
No identity	99	11.1
Total	892	100

native civic myths is a fascinating and important subject, but one that is beyond the scope of this analysis. Because the task at hand is to use Smith's civic myths to further our understanding of how people come to support or oppose language policies, the remainder of the analysis deals with discourse that invokes liberalism, civic republicanism, or ethnoculturalism separately, not in combination.

Liberalism

Almost 13% of all substantive policy-related thoughts are coded as liberal; most refer to declaring English the official language. It turns out that liberal discourse is a prominent player in discussions about the language(s) in which official government business should be conducted and is associated with support for official English more often than with opposition. Yet, as expected, the symbols associated with liberalism were not invoked when participants discussed whether election ballots should be 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 rights-based elements of liberalism to explain opposition to language restrictions, whereas they rely on economic aspects to justify support. It also shows that concerns about economic success overwhelmingly constitute liberal statements saying that people in the United States should speak English.¹⁵ Although 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.

¹⁵ χ^2 significance tests of independence are not included because of the high number of cells with fewer than five observations. Fisher's exact tests for Tables 3 to 5 all yield $p < .001$ for official English and $p < .01$ for English-only ballots.

Table 3. Liberalism and Language Policy Preferences

Liberal category	Official English		English-only ballots		All should know English
	For	Against	For	Against	
Freedom	0	5	0	0	0
Civil/political rights	0	9	1	0	1
English necessary for economic success	6	2	0	0	39
Public/private distinction	25	0	0	0	4
Obey 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	0	0	3
Total	37	23	1	0	51

Civil/political rights and freedom. Although the expectation that liberal discourse would only be used to invoke opposition is flawed, 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 violate civil rights or restrict basic freedoms. For example, Andrew,¹⁶ a freelance 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.” Here, the United States 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; 61% of the liberal opposition to official English was of this flavor.

English necessary for economic success. An aspect of liberalism frequently mentioned in support of making English the official language was the desire to structure social relations in a way that would promote opportunities for economic success. Some participants argued that without a command of English, 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

¹⁶ Names of all participants have been changed.

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. This argument accounts for 6 of the 37 liberal thoughts in favor of the ELA, and the extent to which it was used to argue that people living in America should know English is striking, constituting 76% of all liberal thoughts that make this claim.¹⁷ 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, a 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, the strong link between knowing English and economic security is a reason for promoting the learning of English but *not* for supporting the ELA. Indeed, among people who oppose official-English laws but say it is important for people living in the United States to know English, economic success was the most common reason offered. Again, people made this case by telling stories of people and places they know. Antonio, a 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% 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.

Antonio sees that learning English is beneficial for economic independence but does not think it requires getting the Constitution involved. In short, while most people who noted the link between English and economic success were supporters of the ELA, opponents did so as well, and they all discussed this link in terms of the personal benefits at stake, not in terms of societal obligations.

Public/private distinction. 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% of all

¹⁷ More than half of the people who used this justification for everyone knowing English indicated elsewhere that they favor declaring English the official language.

liberal comments in favor of making English official. Many participants in the study agreed 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 comes from Mary Jane, a member of a 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."

Note 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 we should *not oppose* it. 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 they would have a different preference if they thought the amendment would cross the sacred line between public and private. So, although this value does not *cause* support for the ELA, it *makes support possible* by providing a universally accepted framework through which people interpret the debate.

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, public opinion scholars 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 (24.8% vs. 12.6% and 16.1%). Moreover, they are invoked in 31 of the 64 pro or con statements regarding English-only ballots. This pattern suggests that the role of civic republicanism in shaping policy attitudes has indeed been neglected. Table 4 lists the aspects of civic republicanism in the coding scheme and shows the number of thoughts that appeal to each one for each policy view. As with liberalism, multiple aspects of this tradition are relevant to debates about language. Some emphasize the ability of people to communicate with one another, a concern generally used to support the ELA and everyone knowing English. Others focus on participation in political and community affairs and are not uniformly associated with a particular policy view. When people express the desire to maximize both the quantity and quality of participation, they tend to oppose restrictive policies; when they only talk about maximizing quality, they voice support.¹⁸ A final aspect of civic

¹⁸ The maximization of "quantity" means increasing the sheer number and diversity of people who participate in the political process; the maximization of "quality" means ensuring that people who are involved are politically knowledgeable.

Table 4. Civic Republicanism and Language Policy Preferences

Civic republican category	Official English		English-only ballots		All should know English
	For	Against	For	Against	
Balkanization/too much diversity	17	0	0	0	18
Being able to communicate	3	0	1	1	42
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
Isolation from the rest of the community	1	1	0	1	13
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

republicanism that shapes attitudes on language issues is a preference for local control over the decision-making process.¹⁹

Being able to communicate/too much diversity. The 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 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 breakup of social ties. For example, Mary Jane (quoted earlier) says, “We have such a rich country in people, the diversification of it. But, gee whiz, we need to have something that unifies us.”

¹⁹ Some readers may wonder whether using existing community organizations will inflate the level of civic republican discourse. There is logic to this concern, but data for testing its validity are limited. Measures of attachments to civic republicanism are absent from surveys, and studies of political participation do not look for links between membership in *apolitical* associations and civic republican beliefs. In addition, we are far from understanding how “checkbook” involvement differs from face-to-face involvement regarding the impact of membership on one’s political outlook (according to GSS surveys from 1990 to 1994, however, 69% of Americans belong to at least one club or organization). Further, it would be absurd to suggest that members of a gardening club would argue that a preference for gardening is an important characteristic for Americans to have, or for runners to insist that running helps shape who we are as a political community. Presumably, membership in these organizations is driven by a commitment to the hobby itself more than by a desire to embody the civic republican ideal. Additionally, the mean percentage of civic republican thoughts for and against the issues under investigation here in the three community service focus groups was 24%, whereas the mean percentage for the other groups was 26%. Finally, the prevalence of civic republican arguments does not increase in the female-only focus groups, as some research might lead us to expect (e.g., Conover, 1988); the mean percentage in the female-only groups was 23%, whereas the mean percentage in the mixed-sex groups was 27%.

Another common civic republican concern is simply the need to communicate with one another. At its most basic, this concern is practical: A society cannot function with a multiplicity of languages. A common manifestation of this sentiment is to complain 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'?" Others similarly discussed the dangers of having drivers who are unable 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 people get along better when they speak the same language, and when they get along better, community life improves. For example, Ernie, a member of the 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 unity and harmony is more commonly used to express the belief that everyone should speak English rather than in explicit support for declaring English the official language. But 78% of the people who use communication as a reason for everyone knowing English also explicitly support the ELA elsewhere during the discussion.

Occasionally, wanting to promote unity and minimize social divisions actually led people to oppose the ELA, but this was relatively rare (see "language law is divisive," Table 4). One instance comes from Milton, a member of a runners' 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.

Participation/voting/language law is exclusionary. Political participation is essential to the success of self-government, according to the tenets of civic republicanism. 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. I thought that people who emphasize participation would oppose official-English policies because of their potential for excluding some members of the polity from community life. I expected people to argue that because many Americans do not speak English well, we should provide services and ballots in several languages to ensure that all cit-

izens can fulfill their civic duty by participating meaningfully. It turns out that in some cases, wanting to be sure that everyone can take part in the political process does in fact lead to opposition to restrictive policies. But in other instances, an emphasis on being informed and involved leads to support.

Table 4 shows that civic republican-based opposition to the ELA is fueled mainly by fears that minorities will be excluded from the political process. An example comes from Gloria, a woman in a community service organization. She argues:

I'm nay 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% of all civic republican discourse against the ELA.

So far, concerns about political participation seem to be associated with opposition to restrictive language policies. Looking at views on whether election ballots should be printed only in English, however, reveals a more complex scenario. Many statements 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 driven by concerns about participation and having an informed citizenry. This divergent pattern stems from the alleged longstanding incompatibility in the ideal of a self-governing society between maximizing both the quantity and quality of participation.

The following excerpt from a discussion among members of a community service organization illustrates the type of reasoning that I expected to find:

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 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.

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 writers' group, 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 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 occurs. When people who are not able to follow mainstream political discourse have a say at the ballot box, the sanctity of voting is tarnished and decisions that are made could be harmful. Both sets of viewpoints espouse the civic republican call for citizens who are informed and involved. For people like Cindy, providing bilingual voting materials makes more people involved but not necessarily more informed, a combination worse than having language-minority citizens who are both uninformed and uninvolved. For people like Dave, the call for a participatory society requires us to promote quantity along with quality, and increased quantity would simply be a by-product of 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% of civic republican thoughts against the ELA. An example comes from Alicia, 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 United States 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 that she does not say that she sees anything wrong with some communities deciding to provide materials and services in English only. Rather, the best approach is to let individual communities decide for themselves the language(s) in which government business will be conducted.²⁰

Ethnoculturalism

Ethnocultural discourse accounts for 16% of all pro and con policy-related thoughts. It was obvious during the focus groups that ethnoculturalism is, unlike liberalism and civic republicanism, highly contested. No one argued, for example, that the government should curtail the free speech rights of limited-English speakers or that divisive and apathetic communities were desirable, but people did argue against pursuing policies that promoted ascriptivist understandings of national identity. It was therefore necessary to code the transcripts in a way that distinguished between the *use* of ethnocultural discourse and *support* for the tradition itself. Although statements arguing against ethnoculturalism do not reflect agreement with the idea that white Protestants are the only real Americans, it is still appropriate to categorize them as "ethnocultural" because the existence of this conception of American identity provides the framework through which people are interpreting the policies. It turns out that 72% of the thoughts coded as ethnocultural accept this tradition and 28% reject it. Fifty-three percent of the anti-ethnocultural sentiments came from the three Hispanic groups, 32% came from

²⁰ On 4 August 1999, the city of El Cenizo, Texas, a city where more than 60% 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 case.

the all-white groups, and the rest came from heterogeneous groups. On the flip side, 72% of the endorsements came from the all-white groups. It is not surprising that ethnicity affects whether people see the ELA as a tool to promote ethnic exclusions, yet it is noteworthy that critiques of ethnoculturalism are not confined to Hispanics.

Table 5 lists ethnocultural sentiments included in the coding scheme and reflects the complex role of ethnoculturalism in the American psyche. It also lists the number of thoughts that invoke each one for each policy view. It shows that when people think there is something special about the English language or when they see ethnic minorities as not being real Americans, they tend to favor making English the official language. When, on the other hand, they disapprove of the ethnocultural tendencies of their fellow Americans and fear that this proposal will encourage those tendencies, they oppose the ELA. It also shows that ethnocultural imagery was not invoked when participants debated the merits and drawbacks of English-only ballots. The concerns that this policy raises fall squarely within the realm of civic republicanism.

English as 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 attachment to English in particular and constitute 62% of all ethnocultural comments made in support of official English and 38% of all ethnocultural thoughts claiming that people

Table 5. Ethnoculturalism and Language Policy Preferences

Ethnocultural category	Official English		English-only ballots		All should know English
	For	Against	For	Against	
<i>Acceptance of ethnoculturalism</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
Other ethnoculturalism/ethno. hybrid	4	0	2	0	1
(subtotal)	(37)	(0)	(2)	(0)	(65)
<i>Rejection of ethnoculturalism</i>					
Language law is ethnocultural	0	23	0	0	0
Critical of ethno. tendencies in America	0	11	0	0	2
Need to fight ethnoculturalism	0	2	0	0	2
(subtotal)	(0)	(36)	(0)	(0)	(4)
<i>Total</i>	37	36	2	0	69

living in the United States should speak English.²¹ A common example comes from Jacob, a member of the runners' group, who says, "If they're going to live here, they should speak our language, the language." Another comes from Josie, a member of the public-speaking group, who 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."

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 comparisons make up 14% of ethnocultural thoughts in favor of the ELA and 26% of ethnocultural thoughts arguing for everyone to know English.²² 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." By criticizing language minorities for not living up to romanticized notions of the "good immigrant," these statements belie exclusivist beliefs about what it takes to be an American. Statements in the next section are even more explicit in this regard.

Minorities as not American/anti-immigrant sentiments. Another ethnocultural theme that people used to voice support for the ELA was to describe ethnic minorities, as a group, as being foreigners or not American. Similarly, ethnocultural support for English as the official language sometimes emerged in blatantly anti-immigrant statements. This combination of images—minorities as not American and immigrants as unwanted—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, either to support making English the official language or to say that people living in America should know English.²³ Shelly, a member of a gardening club, illustrates this entrenched ethnocultural tendency to assume that

²¹ Of the participants who used the centrality of English to American identity to argue that everyone in America should know English, 90% also supported the ELA elsewhere.

²² 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.

²³ Again, all participants who used these ethnocultural images to argue that everyone in America should know English also supported the ELA elsewhere.

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 to distinguish between ethnic minorities who are and are not citizens.

Rejection 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. 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. That said, there does seem to be a relationship between ethnicity and using anti-ethnocultural rhetoric to express opposition; 41% of Hispanic participants versus 10% of white participants used condemnation of this tradition to convey their opinions.

Anna, a Hispanic member of a 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 the historical society, offers a tamer angle on the same theme:

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 is 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 ethnoculturalism lead people to support official-English legislation while other aspects lead to opposition. The defining element of ethnoculturalism—an ascriptive basis for national identity—is central to both policy views. The main difference between those who use ethnoculturalism for support and those who use it for opposition is whether they endorse or reject it, a pattern that sets ethnoculturalism apart from liberalism and civic republicanism. 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. Conversely, people who use ethnoculturalism to voice opposition to the ELA object to the stereotypical American and harbor fears that making English official would only serve to burn that image into the American psyche even more than it already is.²⁴ They do not accept that to be an American one needs to be a white English-speaking Protestant 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.

Incorporationism

During the focus groups, it became clear that Smith's model of elite-level constructions of American identity overlooks a common understanding of American-ness among the mass public: the idea of America as a nation of immigrants. I labeled this conception of national identity "incorporationism." It is a wide-ranging civic myth that, as with other civic myths, contains internal contradictions. It celebrates ethnic diversity and praises maintaining cultural traditions while also supporting assimilation and the emergence of new, uniquely American traditions. Although focus group participants regularly invoked incorporationist myths when discussing their views of American identity, they rarely used this conception of American identity when offering their views on official English; it accounts for only 4% of the thoughts under investigation here. When they did use incorporationist discourse, a cultural pluralist version was used to express opposition to the ELA and an assimilationist version was used to express support.

Surveys have proven to be a difficult method for investigating public opinion about incorporationism. As Citrin, Sears, Muste, and Wong (2001) have shown, survey respondents regularly select the middle option when presented with a 7-

²⁴ Although concerns that are more appropriately labeled as liberal (such as fears of discrimination or violating rights) are behind anti-ethnocultural sentiments in some cases, 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 anti-ethnocultural rather than liberal.

point scale where a preference for ethnic groups to “blend into the larger society” is on one end and to “maintain their distinct cultures” is on the other, which suggests that “many Americans do not regard assimilation into the mainstream and maintaining elements of one’s ethnic heritage as mutually exclusive” (p. 260). This simultaneous acceptance of diversity and homogeneity makes incorporationism, or seeing the United States as “a nation of immigrants,” a particularly elusive conception of national identity and makes isolating its role in the formation of policy preferences challenging. Do people find the contradictions of incorporationism too difficult to reconcile with language policy? Do elite formulations of the policies favor other conceptions of American identity and dissuade linking incorporationist discourse to language debates? These are important questions that space and data constraints prevent me from exploring in more detail here. They should be pursued, however, because they confirm that we are still far from understanding the complex role of assimilationism and cultural pluralism in shaping how people think about American national identity and view policies in this issue area (e.g., Merelman, Streich, & Martin, 1998).

Group Conflict and Consensus

Throughout this article, I have noted where differences in group composition (e.g., gender, ethnicity, nature of the organization) did or did not yield systematic patterns of discourse. Because one benefit of focus group methodology is the ability to examine the social nature of opinion formation, it is worth ending with another observation in this regard, particularly in light of the growing interest in deliberative democracy and its relationship to conflict and consensus. In particular, deliberative democracy scholars have been interested in whether discussion leads to more or less conflict when people start out disagreeing—and, when people already agree, whether discussion makes them even more extreme in their views (e.g., Mendelberg & Oleske, 2000; Sanders, 1997). My focus groups by no means provide definitive answers to these questions, but they do highlight the potential for increased dogmatism when group members are in accord and for increased understanding when group members disagree.

I categorized groups as “conflict” or “consensus” on the basis of my impression of the overall discussion and on how participants responded to language policy questions on the pre-discussion survey. Six groups (three female-only, two ethnically heterogeneous) exhibited consensus in favor of official English; two (both Hispanic) exhibited consensus against; and six (one female-only, one Hispanic, and one heterogeneous) exhibited conflict. I examined the impact of conflict and consensus in an exploratory fashion, by simply looking at how participants responded to a question at the end of the focus group that asked, “What is the most important topic that your group discussed?” All groups, whether characterized by conflict or consensus, said that discussing the nature of American identity was very important and that people should spend more time

doing it. Most groups also said they had not previously recognized the importance of language issues. Consensus groups, whether in agreement for or against the ELA, reiterated the importance of their position. They expressed hope that other Americans would think about language policy and that if they did, they would come to feel as the group felt. Although this is hardly strong evidence of increased dogmatism, consensus groups conveyed that they wanted other Americans to “see the light.” Conflict groups, on the other hand, said the most important thing was to recognize not only the salience of the issue, but also its complexity. The more one discusses language conflict, they argued, the less sure one becomes of his or her views. For example, Marge, a woman in the historical society (a conflict group), said the most important part of the discussion was realizing

that there are so many different shades of gray it’s not funny. And no one head can come up with answers on any issue. And the more discussion that we can have on issues, you don’t see the layers until the discussion comes out and somebody brings their point into it and it makes you think.

Conflict groups, in other words, operated as proponents of deliberative democracy would hope. People listened to and respected each other, were open to new ideas, and emerged with a more nuanced perspective. No conflict group ended with consensus for or against official English, but they did agree that language policy is one tough and important topic.²⁵

Conclusions

The three main conceptions of national identity under investigation here provide cognitive tools for Americans to interpret issues that arise from ethnic change. The ideas associated with these conceptions featured prominently when people explained their attitudes toward restrictive language policies. Enduring conceptions of what it means to be an American shape how people interpret language policy debates, but the relationship between identity and opinion is not as straightforward as previous research would suggest. Liberalism and civic republicanism are internally conflictual, ethnoculturalism is contested, and incorporationism is in the shadows. These relationships emerge more fully here than in survey-based analyses.

This analysis also points to some observations worthy of future investigation. One is the idea that two seemingly similar policies can have different levels and causes of support among the public. Opinion data have shown that people are more likely to support the general idea of declaring English the official language than they are of English-only ballots, a discrepancy that is consistent across

²⁵ Disagreement in the focus groups remained quite civil. Settings where discussants are strangers or where the policy implications are more immediate would likely exhibit more aggressive conflict, which could alter the patterns seen here (Mendelberg & Oleske, 2000).

surveys and appears in the focus groups as well. Moreover, the factors that drive support for one policy may differ from the factors that drive support for another. As Tables 3 to 5 show, the issue of bilingual ballots did not elicit either the liberal or ethnocultural conceptions of national identity. The cognitive link between ballots and participation appears to be strictly civic republican in nature. In short, considerations that affect attitudes will vary even though the policies being examined are derived from a common political issue. A more systematic analysis into the dynamics of this variation would be worthwhile.

A second avenue for future work concerns the finding that civic republicanism plays a large part in providing the vocabulary people use to express their views on language conflict. Public opinion scholars would do well to incorporate this civic myth into their analyses and to develop survey instruments that capture this distinct tradition. Including civic republicanism in symbolic politics research becomes even more important when we recognize that concerns about all citizens being able to be a part of public life promote divergent policy views. The notion of an active and informed citizenry resonates with many participants. They have an image of Americans attending political rallies, pulling levers in voting booths, and being a part of the governing process. Yet widespread attachment to this ideal does not result in consensus regarding language policies. 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 bi-directional influence of an entrenched civic myth emerges because of the openness that focus group research permits. Scholars should pursue creative strategies that allow for this complexity to be explored through other methodologies.

Finally, the three traditions do not exhaust the ways in which people reason about language policy. Americans do not consistently subscribe to a single definition of what it means to be American. Table 2, for instance, shows that 12% of the thoughts involve the simultaneous expression of more than one tradition. This figure represents a lower bound of the degree of conceptual hybridization at work in the American psyche; it does not take into account that most participants do indeed use multiple traditions throughout the group interview. It is important to ask what this hybridization means for the arguments presented here and for this research agenda. But before exploring how these traditions work in concert, we need to develop theories about their independent relationship to the policy debates at hand, which has been the goal of the current analysis.

For the next step, I would urge us to follow the example of symbolic racism scholars who developed a theory that combines elements from disparate orientations, namely liberalism and anti-black affect (e.g., Henry & Sears, 2002). In particular, the simultaneous expression of civic republicanism and ethnoculturalism could be an avenue of fruitful research. Symbolic racism theories point to the simultaneous expression of liberalism and anti-black affect as providing the vocabulary that makes modern expressions of racism possible. Perhaps civic

republicanism and ethnoculturalism form another version that symbolic politics theories have not addressed before. Smith (1988) has acknowledged that the principles of civic republicanism have often “been used to shield deplorable local abuses” (p. 232) and create a slippery slope that allows for the exclusion of others in the name of the public good. A well-functioning society, it has been argued, requires a certain amount of homogeneity, a need that has often enabled the exclusion of others and the denial of rights on the basis of ascriptive characteristics. Perhaps the simultaneous expression of civic republicanism and ethnoculturalism is a form of “symbolic nativism”—a modern way to express anti-immigrant sentiments. Such an analysis should be pursued using both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Debates about the language(s) in which interactions between citizens and government should take place in the United States are on the rise and will most likely be a part of national and local political dialogue for quite some time, especially as the ethnic composition of the nation continues to change. Debates on these issues arise not only because of population shifts, but also because these issues tap into people’s very sense of who they are and what they think their national identity means. The concept of national identity became an important feature of political discourse all over the world during the latter half of the 20th century. One cannot read a newspaper without finding an article about a place where differences in ethnicity, religion, or race are causing internal conflict. Although we do not see calls for national boundaries to coincide with the territorial distribution of ethnic groups, as is so common elsewhere, we have seen great changes in the ethnic makeup of the country, and the state finds itself repeatedly challenged to find solutions to problems that arise from such change. How ordinary citizens react to these changes and to the government’s responses is something that political leaders have to contend with and political scientists rightly seek to understand. As the United States tries to incorporate new residents into the polity and deal with issues that arise from demographic change, the question of what being American means is going to be more prominent and in flux. Ethnoculturalism is not as universally accepted as liberalism, and over the next several decades, more and more of the American population will be excluded by ethnoculturalism’s narrow vision of who is and is not an American. Perhaps it will eventually fade from the radar screen as a viable image of American identity. In the meantime, however, conceptions of identity—including ethnoculturalism and civic republicanism—are going to be prominent players in how policy issues such as language and immigration are interpreted and in how preferences are voiced.

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Foundation grant 9807968. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Deborah J. Schildkraut, Department of Politics, Rice Hall, Oberlin College, Oberlin, OH 44074. E-mail: debbie.schildkraut@oberlin.edu

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