

Issue Brief: Language Policy and Socio-Economic Status/Class in the US

Key Words

Socio-Economic Status (SES), Language Policy, Competition, Globalization

Description

This issue brief will examine some of the issues pertaining to the how language policy and SES are related. Due to a large flux of immigration from nations with a common linguistic and cultural background, and the globalized economy, there have been growing instances of a direct correlation between language policy and socio-economic status. For the purpose of providing an overview of this topic, the Spanish language will be the primary foreign language of focus.

Key Points

- The United States has no official language, even though English is the de-facto language and the primarily language used for official documentation
- There has been a growing movement in the United States to make English the official language of the country
- Many native-born English speakers feel threatened by the recent waves of immigrants that have formed large ethnic enclaves and have continued to use their native languages, and feel that they are disadvantaged when it comes to the work force due to their inability to speak a foreign language
- A counter movement has emerged to combat the push to make English the official language, claiming that the policy is discriminatory in nature, and takes away from the enriching cultural diversity of the United States
- With the increasing globalization of the economy and diversification of society, there has been a movement to make foreign languages a more essential part of public education

Issue Brief

The United States has no official language on the federal level of government. English is the de facto language, according to the census data from 2007, and is spoken by as the only language by 80.3% of the population 5 years and older. English was also reported to be spoken at least at a level of “well” by 75.7% of the population that did not speak only English at home. A total of around 95.2% of the population in 2007 had the ability to speak English according to the census survey. After English, Spanish is the common language spoken in the United States by just about 12.2% of the population. Other major languages spoken include French, German,

Mandarin, Korean, Vietnamese and Tagalog.¹ Even though there is no official language on the federal level, most state governments have passed legislation that has made English the official language.

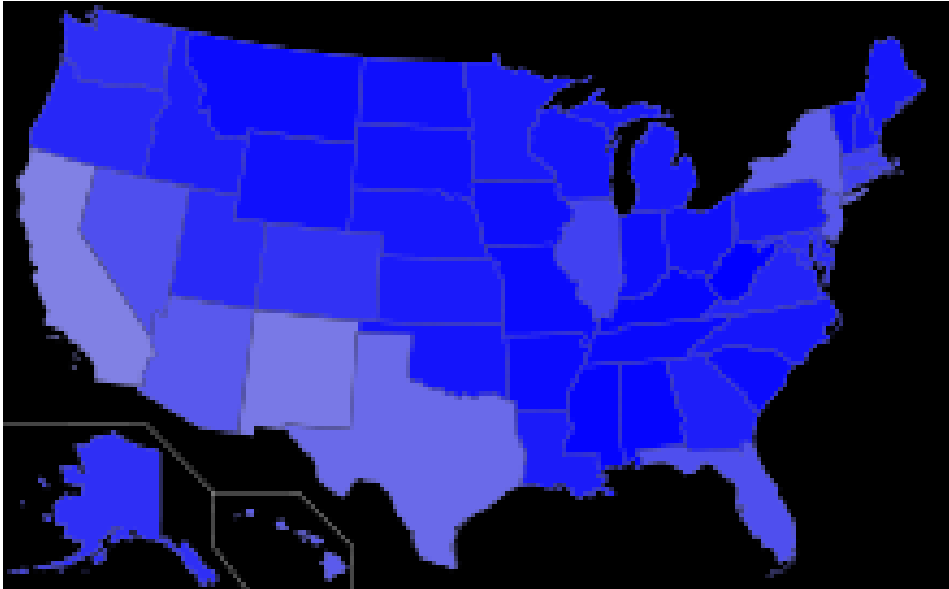


Map of the US that shows which states do and do not have English as the official language

Due to the majority of the populations ability to only speak English and the pro-English sentiments that have been increasing in recent years, the ability to speak English has had a direct impact on one's income. Based on the median incomes for full time, year-round workers in 1999, on average English only speakers made \$35,217 while people who spoke another language (all levels of ability to speak English) made \$29,600. When broken down by the level of ability to speak English, those who spoke English "very well" had an income of \$34,251 and those who spoke English "well" had an income of \$27, 242. The income disparity was greatest for those who speak English "not well", who made an average of \$20,956. This disparity was stated not to vary to a great degree depending on the person's non-English language.²

¹ <http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/language/data/acs/ACS-12.pdf>

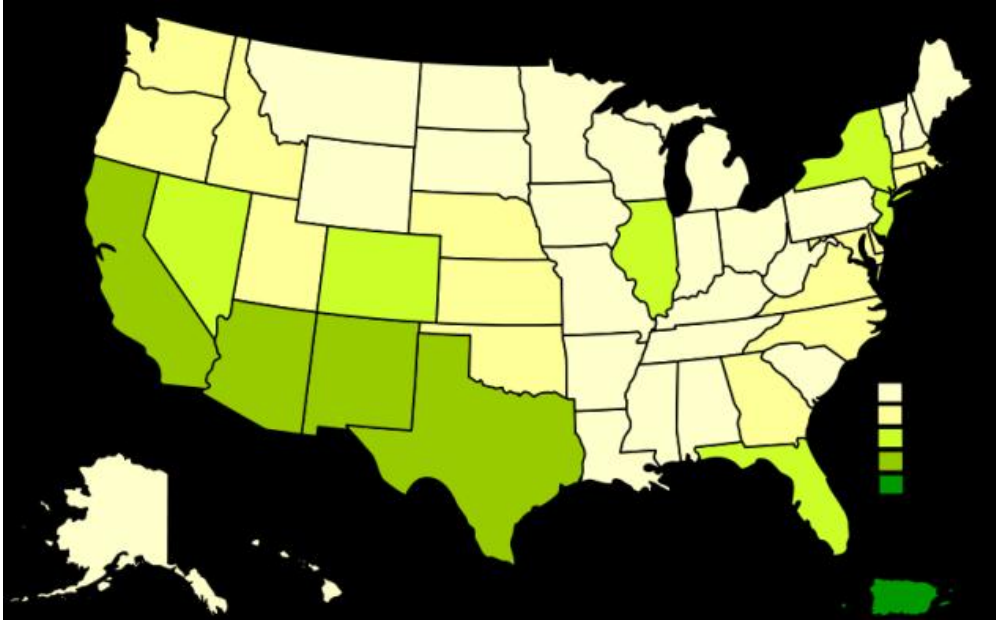
² http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/language/data/acs/PAA_2005_AbilityandEarnings.pdf



Distribution of native English Speakers in the US (highlighted in blue)

Non-native English speakers are not the only ones who reported feeling economically disadvantaged due to linguistic factors. Many native-born, Anglo-Americans (Americans that only speak English) in ethnic enclaves with a language more pre-dominant than English, have found it difficult to conduct business in the area. Miami, Florida, for example has a Hispanic population of 60% according to the 2006 census. The census reported that 58.5% of the population speaks Spanish, with about half of this population speaking English at a “not well” level. English only speakers were reported to make up only 27.2% of the population. Many different businesses in a wide variety of fields are known for advertising and speaking in Spanish regularly. This puts English only speakers at a great disadvantage, and is contributing the increasing flight of native born, Anglo-Americans from Miami.³

³ http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/24871558/#.T1mBB_XLOSp



Percentage of people 5 years and over who speak Spanish at home in 2008 (highlighted in green)

Foreign language classes have become an area of focus for many concerned with the education of American students. Many proponents of bilingual education have pointed out that the United States is lagging behind other nations in terms of language education. In 2010, the board of education reported that only 10 states required foreign language study for high school students. The Board of Education particularly noted that low income, minority, and rural area students especially lag behind their peers in not only foreign languages, but also in knowledge of geography and foreign cultures.⁴ In an increasingly globalized world, where job competition is extremely high due to the scarcity in employment opportunities, and areas experiencing growth such as this service sector being increasingly in need of employees knowledgeable in other languages, many consider foreign language classes to be an essential part of education.

⁴ <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/education-and-language-gap-secretary-arne-duncans-remarks-foreign-language-summit>



Little Havana, an ethnic enclave in Miami, Florida

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