

Issue Brief: Language Policy/ Immigrant Status Policy in the U.S.

Key Words (4-6)

Language Policy, Immigration, Naturalization, Official Language, English, Spanish,

Description (2 sentences)

This issue brief will highlight the connection between language policy and immigrant status in the United States. It will focus on the attempts to make English the official language of the United States and immigrant's mandate to learn the language to become naturalized.

Key Points (4-6)

- Language policy is a politically contentious issue
- Linguistic Access such as civil and political rights for non-English speakers vs. People who push for English as the official language of the U.S.
- According to the US Census, in 2007 over 55 million people stated that they spoke a language other than English at home
- Naturalizations requires immigrants to display the ability to read, write, and speak English to become U.S. citizens
- Another aspect of the issue that immigrants are yearning to learn English, but the proper governmental resources aren't available to them

Issue Brief (500-700 words)

The debate over language policy in the United States is quite a controversial topic. Assimilationists and pluralists have argued over issues such as education policies for language minority students, access to civil rights, political rights and governmental resources for non-English speakers, and the establishment of English as the national language in the United States (Schmidt, 11). Spanish is the second most spoken language in the US with about thirty-five million Americans speaking it at home as their principal language. French, Russian, German, and Chinese collectively are spoken by about six and a half million Americans in their households (<http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/language>). An official language would be a mechanism to impose assimilation upon immigrants.

Naturalization is interconnected with language policy in the United States. Immigrants are individuals that are permitted into the country as lawful permanent residents under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). Most people aren't immediately approved and have established permanent residence in the United States for at least five years. During this time period, immigrants have acquired the ability to read, write, and speak English, and an interest in naturalizing in the country. This period that allows immigrants to become acclimated with the language barrier and other differences from their native lands is crucial. An immigrant becomes far more of an asset when they have a working handle of the English language; they are able handle certain task that mandate knowledge of English, but can also fall back on being bilingual skill-set in a case where a second language is beneficial (Woodrow-Lafield, 188-192). Elizabeth Rodriguez, a native of Chihuahua, Mexico states that education is crucial to an immigrant's pursuit of success in the United States. Rodriguez asserts that, "there is no doubt that education is the key to me leaving behind my work as a childcare provider in favor of a successful professional career". While Rodriguez has begun taking English classes in Sacramento she feels that governmental resources are sparse and it is quite difficult for an immigrant to become fluent in English

(http://www.alternet.org/immigration/131293/education_is_the_key_to_integration_for_immigrants/).

The question will continue to be raised whether or not English should be declared the national language of the United States, or should the nation continue to go without an official language augmenting the richness of cultural diversity in the country. Some politicians have taken shots as President Obama for stating that Americans should look to learn foreign languages, while not being stern enough in his stance on immigrants learning English. As mentioned before

language policy is a politically contentious issue; movements against bilingualism such as “English only”, California’s Proposition 63, and various initiatives against bilingual ballots demonstrate some people’s disdain towards non-English speaking individuals (Woodlard, 268). Race and socioeconomic status are both factors that play into the discussion. It is clearly important to our social structure that immigrants must have a strong enough grasp on the language to pass the naturalization test. However, as statistics show many immigrants continue to speak solely their native language at home. Is this creating a situation where immigrants are doing just enough to pass the test, but never work enough to become fluent in the language? Obama’s asserts that it is an asset for a nation to have multiple languages as the world is getting more and more interdependent; while this may be the case, one must still question if an official language is a fundamental need for a country’s identity

(http://www.ontheissues.org/international/barack_obama_immigration.htm.)

Images

Figure 2a.

Major Language Groups and English-Speaking Ability by Age: 2007

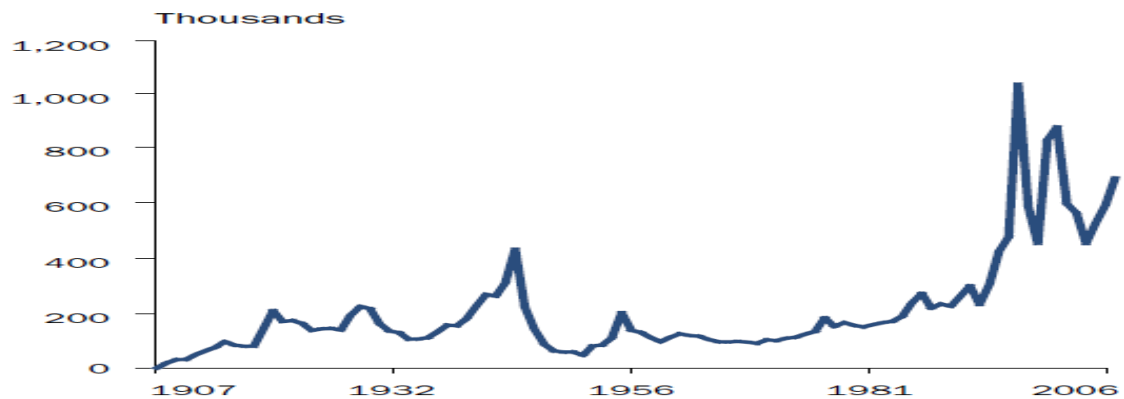
(Population 5 years and older, in millions. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see www.census.gov/acs/www/)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007 American Community Survey.

Figure 1.

Persons Naturalized: Fiscal Years 1907 to 2006



Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, N-400 naturalization data, Fiscal Years 1907 to 2006.

Websites (3-5)

<http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/language/>

<http://www.immihelp.com/citizenship/naturalization-eligibility.html>

<http://www.migrationinformation.org/feature/display.cfm?ID=818>

http://www.alternet.org/immigration/131293/education_is_the_key_to_integration_for_immigrants/

http://www.ontheissues.org/international/barack_obama_immigration.htm.)

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