The English Only Movement

By Patricia Bosiak for Southern New Hampshire University. A Summary of an Article by Linda Chávez. 1995. One nation, one common language. This paper was first presented at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, March 21, 1996.

What is the English only movement?

On the most basic level, it is the movement to pass constitutional amendments at the national and state level to make English our official language. These attempts to make English the official language have created a bitter debate between those for and against the movement. Each side sincerely believes their position will make for a stronger and more unified America. However, because of strong emotions, the ideology on both sides has become riddled with a mixture of historical facts, mythology, and half truths. Elliot Judd, in his article, The English Language Amendment: A Case Study on Language and Politics states this most eloquently: A language is more than a grammatical or communicative system. It is a symbolic system laden with emotional attachments that can arouse the deepest passions.

This issue of having an official language is not a new debate as our founding fathers wrestled with this issue. They ultimately decided not declare an official language rather than create conflict that could have jeopardize our fledgling nation. According to Elliott Judd, the reasons for not naming an official language included a belief in tolerance for linguistic diversity, the economic and social value of foreign language knowledge, and cultural freedom of those living in a new country. Language was a personal choice. It should be noted that our founding fathers may have had a more pragmatic reason for not choosing an official language. Freedom of choice in language served to attract immigrants to America, and linguistic diversity allowed information to be disseminated to these groups.

Reasons for the English Only Movement

The first, and perhaps the most nationalistic, is the belief that English unites us as a nation. S.I. Hayakawa, in his article, Bilingualism in America: English should be the only Language, cites the example of Japanese and Chinese immigrants in California. Prior and during World War II, the relations between these two groups were poor at best. However, as new English speaking generations came along, they began to communicate and socialize. Today this has resulted in these two groups forming Asian-American societies.

Closely aligned with this belief is the idea of the melting pot. Proponents of English only state there has always been a tacit requirement of immigrants to learn English. They believe that linguistic and cultural assimilation of groups into American society is beneficial to the social, economic, and political unity of the country (Elliott, 118). There are those within the movement who go so far as to state that if non-English communities continue to flourish, the United States runs the risk of political disunity and even potential disintegration. They point to countries such as Canada, Belgium, and Sri Lanka who have experienced ethnic conflicts and demands for political autonomy as a result of language.
Some supporters of the English only movement believe that current policies such as bilingual education and bilingual ballots are deterring people from learning English. What incentive is there for people to learn English if they can obtain services without mastering the language, the English language that is. They are quick to point out that current bilingual education programs violate the original intent of the Bilingual Educational Act of 1968. They assert it was originally designed to provide a transitional method of education for non-English speakers. Instead bilingual education has become a maintenance program whereby children are sometimes kept in their native language classes for six or more years. As a result, Linda Chávez purports students are not learning enough English to mainstream. She compared bilingual and ESL programs in New York City and found the following results: 92 percent of Korean, 87 percent of Russian, and 83 percent of Chinese children who started intensive ESL classes in kindergarten had made it into mainstream classes in three years or less. There were no figures provided about Hispanic children in bilingual programs mainstreaming but one can only infer that it was considerable less. Opponents also point to its enormous cost; it started as a $7.5-million federal program for Mexican-American children but now cost over $5.5 billion (Chávez).

Bilingual ballots are closely associated with bilingual education in the minds of many English only proponents. The provision for bilingual ballots began in 1975 to provide access to election materials in communities where there was a considerable non-English population. English only proponents argue that people cannot make an informed choice without knowing English and are prey to bloc voting by special interest groups. S.I. Hayakawa asserts that there is little evidence for the need of bilingual voting ballots. He writes in his article that even prominent Hispanic organizations acknowledge that more than 90 percent of native-born Hispanics are currently fluent in English and more than half of that population is English monolingual. He also makes reference to the fact that there is more than a 100 different languages in the United States? If we offer bilingual ballots for Hispanics, for example, do we not have to provide them to all non-English speaking people?

Opposition to the English only movement

Those who oppose the English only movement point out that the United States has always been a multilingual society and there has never been any social or political disunity arising out of language. The closest thing to a separatist movement in the United States, the civil war, had nothing to do with language. They also challenge the idea that U.S. has been a melting pot with immigrants quickly shedding their native language for English. Immigrants in the past were no more willing or unwilling to abandon their native languages and cultures in favor of English and American culture than those today. At best we can say that the melting in the U.S. has depended on the group, where the groups were located, and how receptive wider society was to the group. James Crawford, in his article Anatomy of the English-Only Movement, provides many examples of various groups and their assimilation or lack there of into American society.

Opponents of the movement also state supporters are misinformed or possess a lack of understanding when they draw parallels to other multilingual countries and make claims of what might happen here. Canada, for example, is officially a bilingual country recognizing French and English where the United States is not. Second, the complaints of the francophone resulted from linguistic repression. Lastly, in the largely French speaking province of Canada, we are not talking about linguistic freedom but rights for improvements in social, economic, and political
status. Once these improvements were made as well as linguistic freedom guaranteed, the conflict between the two groups subsided.

Opponents point out that extreme caution must be exercised to avoid overgeneralizations when comparisons are made between two countries. Yes, there may be civil wars based on linguistic differences but is language the source of the problem? Are there other reasons for division such as social, economic, and political inequality or repression? Are linguistic differences the source of all problems or merely a manifestation of other forms of unequal treatment (Judd, 123)

Opponents challenge the idea that national unity can be achieved through policies restricting language use. Implicit in this assumption is that people are not learning English because of certain governmental policies and regulations and would do so if they were abolished. There is no evidence opponents argue that those who arrived before policies such as bilingual education and bilingual ballots were any more successful at mastering English than those who arrived after. James Crawford points out that except in isolated locations, immigrants to the United States have typically lost their native languages by the third generation; and thus, there is no need for English only legislation.

What about the assertion by English only supporters that bilingual education is ineffective and actual impedes the academic progress of children? Elliot Judd writes in his 1987 article that there are no definitive studies and that it is premature to denounce bilingual education. On the other hand, James Crawford in his 1996 article, states that research on second-language acquisition has increasingly shown the academic benefits of bilingual instruction. Indeed, when language-minority students fail, it is more likely from too little instruction in their native language than too little English. He cites a long-term national study which has documented higher student achievement in developmental bilingual classrooms than in transitional bilingual or structured English immersion classrooms.

What about bilingual ballots? Should they be banned because non-English speakers are not well informed on the issues? Opponents state that the issues presented through non-English media are just as accurate and detailed as those presented by the English media. Also, they are quick to point out that the average English speaking voter is not necessarily better informed

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If English is declared our national language, it will definitely affect how we teach and the general environment of the classroom. We have to remember that as teachers we will be held accountable by those recruited to enforce the policy. Either we implement the policy and receive support from those above (administration, school boards, and governmental educational authorities) and the public but at the same time run the risk of alienating our students? On the other hand, if we do not, are we at risk of losing our jobs?

He reminds us that we are not only part of the political process but that we must be advocates. We need to research and disseminate information to refute inaccurate claims made by those on both sides of this contentious issue. It is important to get this in the hands of the decision makers. At the same time, we must realize that it still may not be enough.
English Only Movement Today

The English only movement does not seem to be ending anytime soon. Variations of English only proposals have received 60-90 percent approval in opinion polls and ballot boxes. This pattern has held true across every demographic category age, sex, income, education level, political, and ideological affiliation except for ethnicity. Official English measures have now been adopted by twenty-three states. In 1996, for the first time, Congress voted on a bill designating English as the federal government’s sole language of official business. Could an amendment for English as the official language of the United States be right around the corner?

References: