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Press **one** for English

LANGUAGE POLICY,  
PUBLIC OPINION,  
AND AMERICAN IDENTITY

*Deborah J. Schildkraut*

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# Contents

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## Discussing Language Policy

MUCH OF THIS BOOK has been concerned with establishing that there are multiple conceptions of American national identity and that these conceptions have the power to shape how people feel about political issues. The purpose of the next two chapters is to examine how these several notions of American identity are related to policy preferences on official-English and English-only ballots.<sup>1</sup> By drawing on Smith's tripartite description of American national identity—consisting of liberalism, civic republicanism, and ethnoculturalism—I improve upon public opinion research that has sought to understand the relationship between identity and opinions. Smith's treatment of American identity encompasses a broader range of concerns than is typically included in surveys that aim to measure how Americans define their national identity. In developing each component as a distinct tradition with its own intellectual and legal history, Smith avoids placing these three traditions along a single dimension with liberal norms at one end and ethnocultural beliefs at the other. Adding incorporationism to the model improves the analysis even further, for it reflects yet another widely accepted conception of what being American means. As the goal of the study is to investigate how citizens use national identity to make sense of the language debate, analyses that include a variety of conceptions should prove to be more insightful than those that use a more narrow range of possibilities.

I find that although discourse that invokes these conceptions of national identity appears frequently in discussions about language and ethnicity, mere adherence to these traditions is not always enough to determine whether someone will support or oppose restrictive language policies. Abstract notions of American identity have multiple manifestations. The direction in which they influence opinions depends on which of those manifestations are most salient during the discussion and on the specific implications participants draw from their own interpretations of these civic myths. The only conception of national identity with a straightforward relationship to language policy preferences is ethnoculturalism, which conforms to the story line prior empirical research attributes to conceptions of national identity more broadly: ad-

<sup>1</sup> My initial intent was to have bilingual education be an equal partner in this analysis, but discussions on that topic were quite different from the discussions on the other two policies; they were largely driven by concerns about effectiveness, not identity. Therefore, I address bilingual education separately in chapter 7.

herence is associated with support for restrictive policies while rejection is associated with opposition.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IDENTITY AND PREFERENCES

Imagine two people who believe that Americans should be active in public life. One might argue that without an official language, citizens are less able to get along and work together in civic affairs to achieve common goals, while the other might argue that an official language would make it too difficult for people to participate. These two people value the same norm—being involved in one's community—yet arrive at different policy preferences. Unfortunately, we do not know whether and how these concerns influence official-English attitudes because they have not been studied yet. The default has been to (mis)characterize all official-English supporters as ethnocultural. While some official-English supporters indeed harbor anti-immigrant sentiments, it is easy to imagine that others have more legitimate concerns about the well-being of the community.

This scenario informs the assumptions that underlie my expectations regarding all of the notions of American identity under investigation here. The first assumption is that national identity should not be thought of as a single dimension. People are not simply liberal or ethnocultural, and these two components of American identity are not polar opposites. As I have argued, people can adhere to either one, or to both, and other important conceptions of American identity are overlooked when a dichotomous measure is used.

Second, it is not necessarily the case that each notion of American identity consistently leads to a particular policy preference. For instance, it is not the case that liberal ideals always lead one to oppose restrictive policies. Framing, context, and interpretation all play a part in whether and how different components of national identity influence opinion formation. If the debate is not framed in liberal terms, then liberalism might not be influential in this issue area despite its centrality to definitions of "American-ness." Further, symbols that are widely cherished can be interpreted differently by different people. The direction in which liberalism, civic republicanism, ethnoculturalism, and incorporationism shape preferences will depend on whether they are associated with the policy in question and the particular aspects of each one that are emphasized by the individual.

In this sense, the ways in which conceptions of national identity are used among ordinary Americans might appear to differ from the ways in which they are used by policy makers, especially if one examines my claims in the context of Smith's analysis. In his work each civic tradition tends to point in one, and only one, direction regarding citizenship laws. For example, if a person believes in the rule of law and individual rights and freedoms, then the liberal tradition says he is eligible for citizenship. Likewise, if a person is a white

Christian, then he can belong, according to the ethnocultural tradition. That clarity breaks down, however, once we turn to other policy areas. What exactly is the liberal prescription when it comes to deciding whether the government should print documents in multiple languages? As we saw in chapter 3, partisans on either side of the issue can come up with an answer to that question that supports their view. This difference has more to do with the nature of the policy in question rather than with an inherent difference in how elites and masses rely on civic traditions when devising a preferred policy. When it comes to determining eligibility for citizenship, each civic tradition functions in more or less the same way: if people embrace or otherwise meet the prescriptions of the tradition, they can belong. But when it comes to language policy, the guidance provided by competing conceptions of national identity is much less straightforward. It is still the case that with each tradition, as long as the policy in question promotes (or does not threaten) its prescriptions, then the policy is acceptable. The difference is that it is much less clear whether a particular policy promotes (or threatens) those prescriptions. That activists and lawmakers on both sides of language conflicts invoke similar traditions supports the case that differences in policy type rather than differences between elites and masses drive the seemingly disparate nature of how American identity is implicated in citizenship law and language policy.

It is not necessarily the case, however, that both sides will invoke the same particular norm. Instead, people might appeal to different aspects of the same overarching civic tradition to endorse opposing views. As we saw in chapter 3, activist supporters of official-English note that intrusions into public life will not occur if English is made the official language, whereas opponents contend that official-English infringes upon freedom of speech. Both sides are looking to the liberal tradition when they are making these claims, but they are appealing to different aspects of that tradition.<sup>2</sup> Yet it might also be the case that both sides do indeed look to the same particular norm but interpret its relevance in terms of language policy in contradictory ways. The example described earlier of two people's desire for an informed and involved citizenry leading to opposite preferences is a case in point. The extent to which either of these possibilities actually plays out in practice among ordinary Americans remains to be seen. But before moving on to the empirical analysis, I offer brief descriptions of how we might expect each tradition to feature in the focus groups in light of the phenomena discussed thus far.

#### LIBERALISM

The "problem" with liberalism with regard to immigration and ethnic change is that it is more or less silent on issues relating to the manner in which new

<sup>2</sup> Smith himself notes the internal tensions within the civic traditions (1997, 20, 30). His main goal, however, is to establish ethnoculturalism as an alternative civic tradition to liberalism and civic republicanism, not to explore these internal tensions.

members should be incorporated into the limited contractual government. 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. Liberalism teaches people to value being free to do what they want and being tolerant of other people's right to do what *they* want; it does not place much stock in forging common ties with fellow citizens.

However, I showed in chapter 3 that activists on both sides of language conflicts invoke liberal norms when making their case. Politicians and activists who oppose official-English criticize such laws as discriminatory and as violations of free speech. For example, Rep. Sheila Jackson-Lee (D-TX), arguing against the English Language Empowerment Act of 1996, says, "The Founders of this country recognized the danger of restricting its citizens' freedom of expression. Language, like religion, is an intensely personal form of self-expression which must not be subject to governmental regulation."<sup>3</sup> On the other side of the issue, U.S. English proclaims it supports making English the official language because, along with other reasons, doing so will allow immigrants to pursue the American Dream and achieve economic success. One of their print ads depicts a man with dark hair and a moustache sweeping the floor of a room with folding chairs scattered about. The accompanying text states: "Immigrants who don't learn English can really clean up America." U.S. English also goes to some lengths to point out that official-English laws will affect only public, not private, enterprises.<sup>4</sup> If these ways of framing the issue reach the mass public, then symbols associated with liberalism can fuel both support for and opposition to official-English laws. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that overall, liberalism will not play a large role in discussions of language policies. But when it does, people against official-English will argue that it violates freedom of speech or other rights and liberties, and people in favor of it will argue that making English the official language will sustain the American Dream and will not intrude on private interactions.

#### CIVIC REPUBLICANISM

The civic republican tradition speaks to the concerns raised by debates about language policy more clearly than does the liberal tradition. Civic republicanism is fundamentally concerned with the interactions among citizens and how such interactions can best promote the public good. The ability of citizens to govern themselves and act in ways that promote this public good are largely dependent upon whether the design of public policies enhances or

hinders those activities. Whether public life is conducted in one or multiple languages profoundly shapes the alternatives available for achieving such ends. 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 (a frequent claim of official-English activists), they should be more likely to favor regulating language use. Alternatively, when people emphasize the importance of having an informed and involved citizenry, they should be more likely to oppose official-English laws. Analyses of activist rhetoric do not have much to say about this last concern, but given its centrality to the civic republican tradition, and given the civic republican tradition's centrality to conceptions of American identity, I expect it to surface in the focus group discussions, particularly when participants debate English-only ballots.

#### ETHNOCULTURALISM

Unlike liberalism and civic republicanism, it is rare to see ethnoculturalism explicitly endorsed, at least as far as mainstream political discourse is concerned. Despite this lack of public endorsement, subtle nods to the idea that certain ascriptive characteristics define who is and who is not an American are still common. Debates about whether to make English the official language or to provide voting materials only in English directly relate to these types of beliefs. Language issues would not arise if everyone spoke English and so these debates, by their very nature, suggest that the stereotypical image of an American as a white, English-speaking person of Anglo-Saxon descent is being challenged. Since this image is so clearly implicated in the existence of 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 laws who invoke ethnocultural sentiments will express discomfort with ethnic change and show contempt for immigrants who do not conform to the dominant modes of interaction in American society. In light of the findings presented in chapter 5, however, which show that explicit critiques of ethnoculturalism are common, this expectation needs modification. Many people are openly critical of America's legacy of treating its nonwhite or non-English-speaking residents worse than their white and English-speaking counterparts, and those who offer such critiques are likely to view official-English laws as contributing to that legacy. Thus, ethnocultural discourse should consist of two forms: endorsement and rejection. Endorsements should be associated with support for official-English, whereas rejection should be associated with opposition.

<sup>3</sup> See *Congressional Record*, 142, no. 116, part 2 (August 1, 1996): H9749.

<sup>4</sup> See U.S. English website at [www.usenglish.org](http://www.usenglish.org).

## INCORPORATIONISM

I argued in earlier chapters that Smith's typology overlooks an important conception of American identity, namely the idea of the United States as a nation of immigrants and the profound impact it has had over the development of political culture in American society. Within the category of incorporationism I found two main strands, multiculturalism and melting pot assimilationism. Recall that multiculturalism is characterized by a celebration of cultural diversity in the United States and melting pot assimilationism emphasizes the evolving nature of what being American means; as more and more ingredients are added to the mix, the very idea of American identity changes. Both interpretations appeared often in discussions about American identity and should therefore play a role in the opinion formation process regarding language policy. By definition, multiculturalism should be associated with opposition to restrictive policies. No matter how well-intentioned such proposals may be, a multicultural interpretation of the incorporationist civic myth should lead people to resist policies designed to homogenize. At the same time, there is no reason to expect people to endorse "hard" multiculturalism; the preponderance of evidence suggests it is unlikely that people will advocate group-based rights or ethnic separatism. There is no similarly logical relationship as far as melting pot assimilationism is concerned. People might think that a common language is part and parcel of the evolutionary experience and therefore support official-English, or they might think that this evolutionary process would take place on its own, as it has in the past, and not need governmental regulation.

## MEASURING POLICY PREFERENCES

The previous chapter concentrated on whether the four-part typology provides an appropriate framework for studying the relationship between conceptions of American identity and policy preferences. To do that, I divided the focus group discourse into two sections. The first is the subject of chapter 5 and consists of those statements that deal with general feelings about being American. The second contains all statements that refer to a particular language policy and provides the set of thoughts analyzed here. I use the same coding procedure from the analysis in chapter 5 but with two additional steps. First, each statement was marked according to which policy, if any, it referred (official-English, English-only ballots, bilingual education). Next, if the statement pertained to a particular policy, it was marked to indicate whether it expressed support, opposition, ambivalence, or no opinion.<sup>5</sup>

I also created a code for comments that did not explicitly mention support

<sup>5</sup> See appendix E for examples of ambivalent and opinionless policy-related thoughts.

TABLE 6.1  
Opinion Direction of Completed Thoughts by Policy Type

Policy	N	%	Direction		
			N	%	
English as official language	938	56.5	Support	226	24.1
			Oppose	213	22.7
			Ambivalent	141	15.0
			No opinion	358	38.2
100					
English-only ballots	101	6.1	Support	34	33.7
			Oppose	30	29.7
			Ambivalent	17	16.8
			No opinion	20	19.8
100					
Bilingual education	231	13.9	Support	12	5.2
			Oppose	52	22.5
			Ambivalent	34	14.7
			No opinion	133	57.6
100					
Americans should speak English	389	23.4	n.a.	389	100
Total	1659	100		1659	

for declaring English the official language per se, but rather argued that everyone in America should speak English. I suspected that people who made such comments would also support making English official. Indeed, many participants did not distinguish between the formal pronouncement and the desired condition and thought that the former would promote the latter. Despite the overlap between expressed and implicit support for official-English, I coded 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. In the end, 60 percent of the participants who expressed the general belief that Americans should speak English also supported making English official. The remaining 40 percent were largely opposed to making English official but argued that people should still speak English. By using a separate category for these views, I avoid mischaracterizing those participants who draw distinctions between making English official and the value of speaking English.<sup>6</sup>

Table 6.1 shows how many statements were made in support for or opposition to each policy and how many express ambivalence or no opinion. The policy-related portion of the focus groups was dominated by official-English,

<sup>6</sup> Eighty-one of the 108 participants mentioned the importance of knowing English. This does not mean, however, that the remaining 27 participants think it is acceptable for citizens not to learn English.

due in part to the design of the interview protocol, which began with a reading of a proposed amendment to the Constitution to designate English as the official language.<sup>7</sup> As the emphasis of this chapter is on how symbolic notions of national identity shape when people support or oppose restrictive policies, the analysis that follows concentrates on thoughts that express a clear preference or argue that everyone should speak English.

## FINDINGS

The same 1,659 completed thoughts presented in table 6.1 are categorized in the left half of table 6.2 according to the conception of American identity invoked. More than half of the policy-related discourse is accounted for by the model, with civic republicanism being the most common tradition, although liberalism and ethnoculturalism are not far behind. Note that the row labeled “No identity” (thoughts that do not invoke a particular conception of American identity) contains the highest number of thoughts. This result is due to the inclusion of thoughts on bilingual education in the table and is discussed in more detail in chapter 7. The right half of table 6.2 excludes thoughts on bilingual education. It also excludes thoughts that are ambivalent or do not state an opinion on the policies in question. It categorizes only those thoughts that explicitly argue for or against official-English or bilingual ballots, or argue that everyone should speak English. It is these thoughts that are analyzed in this chapter. In other words, the remainder of this chapter deals with those thoughts in the upper right quadrant of table 6.2 (cells in bold).

### Liberalism

About 12 percent 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. The symbols associated with liberalism were not invoked when the focus group participants discussed whether election ballots should be printed only in English. Table 6.3 lists the different aspects of liberalism in the coding scheme and shows the number of thoughts that invoke each one for each policy position. Within the broad concept of liberalism, there are two main strands. The first promotes rights, freedom, and tolerance and is what many people bring to

<sup>7</sup> To remind the reader, 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.”

TABLE 6.2  
Policy-related Thoughts by Conception of American Identity

Conception of American Identity	All Policy-related Thoughts		Without Bilingual Education, Ambivalent or Opinionless Thoughts	
	N	%	N	%
Liberalism	191	11.51	<b>112</b>	<b>12.6</b>
Civic republicanism	280	16.88	<b>221</b>	<b>24.8</b>
Ethnoculturalism	184	11.09	<b>144</b>	<b>16.1</b>
Incorporationism	62	3.74	<b>36</b>	<b>4.0</b>
Hybrid	139	8.38	110	12.3
Tax/spend	41	2.47	22	2.5
Other	6	0.36	1	0.1
Unclassified	297	17.9	147	16.5
No identity	459	27.67	99	11.1
Total	1659	100	892	100

mind when they think of the dominant political philosophy in the United States. The second emphasizes economic opportunity, the market economy, and the freedom to follow private individual pursuits. In chapter 5, I showed that both strands are powerful symbols of American identity among the participants. The data here show that participants still invoke these principles when discussing language policy and that they tend to use the rights-based strand to explain opposition to language restrictions, whereas they rely on the economy-based strand to explain support. They also show that concerns about economic success overwhelmingly constitute liberal statements saying that people in the United States should speak English.<sup>8</sup> 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 later.

### CIVIL/POLITICAL RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS

As table 6.3 shows, most liberal thoughts against the ELA objected on the grounds that it would discriminate against ethnic minorities, violate civil rights, or restrict basic freedoms. For example, Joan, a woman in a hobby club,

<sup>8</sup>  $\chi^2$  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 6.3 to 6.5 all yield  $p < 0.001$  for official English and  $p < 0.01$  for English-only ballots.

TABLE 6.3  
Liberalism and Language Policy Preferences

Liberal Categories	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

explains that she opposes the ELA because it is reminiscent of overt discrimination from previous eras. She says, "I think that that particular piece of legislation, the way it's stated now, sounds kind of discriminatory. It reminds me of the 'No Irish Need Apply,' that kind of thing that you saw." A more emphatic example comes from Yasmine in a community service organization:

I'm against it because it's illegal. The First Amendment says you have a right to freedom of speech. And therefore if that goes through and that becomes a law, it's directly in violation to the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. . . . It's illegal and directly against not only the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment, but civil rights laws. So, no. No. It's illegal and it's not fair. That's what I think.

Similarly, Andrew, in a career-related group, 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." Most participants envision the United States as a place where people are more or less free to say what they want without being censored or discriminated against, and some fear that the ELA would violate this sacred image by placing restrictions on the languages in which people

communicate. Sixty-one percent of the liberal opposition to official-English was of this flavor.

#### ENGLISH NECESSARY FOR ECONOMIC SUCCESS

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

The argument that knowing English is essential if people living in the United States are to succeed economically accounts for six of the thirty-seven liberal thoughts in favor of the ELA. The extent to which this sentiment was used to argue that people living in America should know English is striking, constituting 76 percent of all liberal thoughts that make this claim.<sup>9</sup> 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 or distant relative who was able to "make it in America" thanks to his or her determination to learn English. Merle, for example, a member of a hobby club, was eager to explain his support for the ELA and shared the story of a hair stylist he knew who was held back because she only spoke Spanish:

And there you had a woman who had so much talent, but the amount of money that she could make was very limited. But we helped her and encouraged her to take classes to learn the English language. This woman now quadrupled her pay. . . . So I think not learning the English language could really curtail you from being successful.

Later in the same group, John describes a memorable message his grandfather gave him about the importance of learning English:

I remember in my house, my grandfather knew German, and I took German in high school. And I come back and he says, "Well, what are you taking German for? Where you gonna go with that?" I said, "Well you speak German I thought, you

<sup>9</sup> More than half of the people who used this justification for everyone knowing English indicated elsewhere that they favor declaring English the official language.

know you learned it from your parents. I thought I could have a conversation with you in German.” He says, “German never got me anywhere. I speak English and you gotta speak English.”

Merle’s hair stylist and John’s grandfather were two of many characters to appear in the stories participants told to convey a simple message: without English, you’ll never “get anywhere.”

For some, the strong link between knowing English and economic security was a reason for thinking everyone should learn English but *not* for favoring the ELA. Indeed, among those who oppose official-English laws but say it is important for people 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, who opposes the ELA, describes how economic class and English acquisition go together in the border town where he grew up:

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

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 discussed this link in terms of the personal benefits at stake, not 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 percent of all liberal comments in favor of making English official. That the United States is a place where the private sector is protected from too much government intrusion came up from time to time in the general discussions about what being American means but not often when compared with other liberal principles like freedom and tolerance. But when discussing specific policy alternatives, the need to maintain the distinction between public and private spheres of life became more important. Many participants 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:

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.

Other times, the public/private distinction was raised to dismiss the fears of people who oppose the law. In dismissing those fears, some participants accused opponents of official-English of being too sensitive and of misinterpreting the intent and scope of the proposed legislation. Such comments suggested that the line between public and private would be respected and that people who fear that this law would prohibit them from speaking other languages are overreacting.<sup>10</sup>

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 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.

#### SUMMARY

The focus groups show that certain aspects of the liberal tradition in America attract people to official-English legislation while other aspects serve as a repellent. Participants value that Americans have the freedom to express themselves, and people who fear that the ELA would encroach upon this cherished norm are against it. Most people accept the liberal notion that, by and large, they should be left alone to pursue individual goals. In making that case, however, they do not go so far as to argue explicitly against the concept of group rights (although they might have if they had been asked about it outright). One manifestation of this belief, the image of Americans as people who work hard to fulfill their potential and strive for economic success, leads some to support the ELA because they feel that this ideal cannot be realized without a command of English. A second manifestation, that government should

<sup>10</sup> The problem with this reasoning is that it mischaracterizes the views of people on both sides of the debate. No supporters in the focus groups, in Congress, or at pro-official-English organizations say they want to regulate speech in the home, and opponents never say that they think such intrusion will happen. Opponents do appeal to free speech, as seen in the quotes from Yasmine and Rep. Jackson-Lee, but they do so within the context of rights and freedom, not while debating the line between public and private affairs.

not regulate private interactions, promotes support by making it acceptable for them to advocate language restrictions.

### *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 relates to policy preferences. In the focus groups, civic republican concerns account for more policy-related thoughts than liberalism, ethnoculturalism, or incorporationism (see table 6.2). Civic republican concerns are invoked in 41 of the 101 statements that refer to printing election ballots only in English and account for 28 percent of the statements saying that everyone in the United States should know English (compared with 13 percent for liberalism, 18 percent for ethnoculturalism, and 5 percent for incorporationism). These numbers suggest that the power of the civic republican ideal to affect policy attitudes has indeed been neglected. Table 6.4 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 policy. Some emphasize unity and the ability of people to communicate with one another, concerns generally raised in support of 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.<sup>11</sup> Another aspect of civic republicanism that shapes attitudes on language issues is a preference for local decision-making control.

#### 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. They note that ethnic and linguistic diversity make it harder to get along and communicate, and without successful communication, there can be no community. The word “balkanized” is used frequently. For example, Tim, a member of a career-related group, in sorting out the potential benefits and drawbacks of making English official, says:

<sup>11</sup> 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 6.4  
Civic Republicanism and Language Policy Preferences

<i>Civic Republican Categories</i>	<i>Official-English</i>		<i>English-only Ballots</i>		<i>All Should Know English</i>
	<i>For</i>	<i>Against</i>	<i>For</i>	<i>Against</i>	
Balkanization/too much diversity	17	0	0	0	18
Being able to communicate	3	0	1	1	42
Language law is divisive	0	4	0	0	0
Language law would be exclusionary	0	19	0	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	1	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
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>108</b>

I think that culturally we're facing, and I think the world is facing, a certain balkanization where people tend to want to stay in their own groups and communicate in their own languages as well, which is, I think, detrimental to . . . certainly our country, ultimately. So if the intention of [the ELA] is to try to break that down, perhaps that's a worthy goal.

The following comments from Harriet and June, supporters of the ELA and members of a public-speaking group, also demonstrate the frustration people can feel regarding the lack of a common sense of identity in the United States. When asked what the most important topic their group covered was, they replied:

HARRIET: The textbooks will tell you we're an individualistic society as opposed to a communitarian society. But I don't think anybody's completely thrilled with the lack of community here. And if we let go of the language . . . that's not healthy. It really isn't.

JUNE: I guess the most important thing we talked about tonight, in my opinion, was probably, again, the language issue and whether or not it's going to unify us or divide us or keep us from being connected to. . . . Are we going to be connected with everyone in our society? That's probably the most important issue.

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 view is to complain about driving exams being offered in several languages. For instance, Kate, a member of a business organization, asks, "How about the driver's license? 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 not able to know where they are or understand the rules of the road. It's 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 people get along better, community life improves. Ernie, for example, a member of the public-speaking group, says:

I'm speaking as an American. 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 who is a citizen or who lives in America.

The idea that communication is necessary for a sense of unity and harmony is more commonly used to express the belief that everyone should speak English rather than in explicit support for declaring English the official language. But 78 percent of those 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 6.4). One instance comes from Milton, a member of a hobby 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. But 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 citizens can fulfill their civic duty by participating meaningfully. It turns out in some cases, wanting to be sure everyone can take part in the political process does indeed lead to opposition to restrictive policies. But in other instances, an emphasis on being informed and involved leads to support.

Table 6.4 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.

Similarly, Rena, in a career-related group, says, "I feel that an amendment would marginalize an already marginalized population and would make them even more on the fringe," and, "I don't think it would really have any kind of impact, except just alienating people who are already feeling alienated." Gloria and Rena know 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, yet they feel that declaring English the official language will make it harder, not easier, for language minorities to be a part of "what's going on." This fear of excluding minorities from participating accounts for 40 percent of all 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 general participation in the community and having an informed citizenry. This divergent pattern stems from the alleged long-standing incompatibility in the ideal of a self-governing society between wanting to maximize both the quantity and the quality of participation.

The following excerpt from a discussion among members of a community service organization illustrates the type of reasoning 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 forty. 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, then 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 a career-related 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 that people cannot be adequately informed without a command of English:

MODERATOR: Cindy, you mentioned earlier when you were trying to parse out what the different effects of [declaring English the official language] might be, you said you aren't really comfortable messing with the Constitution, but the idea of having all ballots in English, that is fine with you. Could you say a little more about that?

CINDY: I agree with that. 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.

This next exchange between Doug, Bob, and Milton, members of a hobby group, further illustrates the tension between quantity and quality that underlies the participatory aspect of civic republicanism:

DOUG: I guess my opposition [to having bilingual ballots], at the risk of seeming inconsistent [with my earlier opposition to the ELA], I don't think that any of the ballots ought to be in anything but English. And the reason is that you have to participate in a dialogue, and to understand what's going on, I think you ought to be able to speak English.

BOB: And if you want to talk in more detail about issues and stuff like that, there are plenty of different language newspapers out there so they could talk about that in that particular language. But when it comes to a legal standpoint, it should be English.

MILTON: Is anyone concerned that we only have 40 percent or fewer people in the United States vote regularly in elections? Does anyone worry that some of that is attributable to the fact that they might not understand what the ballot proposals are or what the elections are about? And if that's the case, would more accessibility and their understanding of the language on the ballot help that? I think we have a problem in so few people vote.

Doug suggests that people who do not know English will not know "what's going on" and should therefore not take part in the project of self-governance. Milton cynically counters that Doug need not worry because the lack of accessible information is effective at keeping language minorities away from the polls. Like Dave, from the community service club, Milton suggests that providing information in other languages could both increase the number of voters and provide them with the tools necessary to prevent the results of their involvement from being "horrific."<sup>12</sup>

Both sets of viewpoints espouse the civic republican call for citizens who are both informed and involved. For some people, increasing involvement means allowing uninformed people to take part, a possibility that offends their notion of a participatory system of government. Imagine a New England town meeting packed with people who obstruct meaningful debate by offering their views on subjects about which they know little. Add multiple languages to this scenario and the situation becomes even more frustrating and ineffective. Cindy and Doug fear that bilingual voting materials will get more people involved but not necessarily more informed, a combination worse than having

<sup>12</sup> On the pre-discussion survey, Milton said he favors having ballots printed in other languages in addition to English. Although he sounds ambivalent in the quote provided here, his answer to his own question would most likely be yes, bilingual ballots would help in terms of accessibility and understanding and would therefore result in more participation.

language-minority citizens who are both uninformed and uninvolved. Others, like Dave and Milton, agree that providing voting materials in multiple languages will increase involvement, but it will do so mainly because it would increase awareness. For them, the civic republican call for a participatory society requires us to promote quantity along with quality, and increased quantity would be a natural 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 even though it hasn't been a factor in activist rhetoric in concrete policy battles. For activists, advocating local control would mean accepting that some places could opt for the "wrong" policy, but for ordinary citizens, the enduring civic republican image of citizens playing a role in deciding their local policies shapes how they interpret the debate. 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. Given that communities vary greatly in their ethnic composition, people argue, official-English is perhaps an issue that is best decided by towns and cities themselves. Those who felt this way argued that one national language policy cannot provide an appropriate way for all places to conduct interactions between their citizens and government. This concern accounts for 29 percent of civic republican thoughts against the ELA.

Francine, Marge, and Ron, members of a historical society, had an exchange that illustrates this sentiment:

FRANCINE: Working at it from the educational side would accomplish the goal [of having people learn English] in a much more gentle and effective way than foisting from above on all the states how to deal with . . . another thing that states usually know better how to . . .

MARGE: This is what our society has done. If it sees an ill, it decides to pass a law instead of letting the community deal with it in its own way.

FRANCINE: That's bad.

RON: Yeah.

MARGE: Another federal mandate coming down from Trenton, or coming down from Washington.

Another example comes from Alicia, a woman in a career-related 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 easily 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 none of these statements indicate that the speakers see anything wrong with some communities deciding to provide materials and services in English only. Rather, they say the best approach is to let individual communities decide for themselves the language(s) in which government business will be conducted.<sup>13</sup>

#### SUMMARY

The previous examples demonstrate that the notion of an active and informed citizenry resonates with many of the participants in the study. They have an image of Americans attending political rallies, pulling levers in voting booths, and being a part of the governing process. Yet the widespread attachment to this ideal vision does not result in consensus on public policies designed to address the incorporation of language minorities into the political process. For some, this image cannot be sustained if public discourse is not conducted with one common language. For others, the image falls apart if the outlets for participation, by design, restrict involvement.<sup>14</sup> This complex relationship between civic republicanism and policy preferences substantiates my claim that the civic republican tradition of American identity deserves more attention in public opinion research.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Ethnoculturalism*

While few people will agree with overtly racist or ethnocultural statements, many still do not see ethnic minorities as Americans. They possess static definitions of American identity that do not adapt to the changing reality of the country's demographic makeup. Along these lines, many members of minority groups do not think of themselves as being American because they do not fit

<sup>13</sup> On August 4, 1999, the city of El Cenizo, Texas, a city where more than 60 percent of the residents speak little or no English, declared Spanish the official language for public city business. Advocates say that the ordinance is intended to connect residents with the local government and "snap the population out of its political lethargy" (McLemore 1999). It would have been interesting to hear what the supporters of local control over the decision making in this policy area would say about this development.

<sup>14</sup> There were also twenty-two thoughts expressing the value of knowing English that were coded as "other republican." No dominant pattern emerged from these thoughts. Some mentioned that learning English is a show of hospitality; others felt that allowing other languages in public discourse would make political corruption more likely; still others involved the simultaneous expression of multiple republican images.

<sup>15</sup> As in chapter 5, I checked for civic republican bias in the community service groups. For the community service groups, the mean percentage of civic republican thoughts in the policy portion of the discussion was 24, whereas the mean percentage for the other groups was 26. The mean in the female-only groups was 23, whereas the mean in the mixed-sex groups was 27.

that static image. As I showed in chapter 5, attitudes relating to this tradition were expressed regularly when the participants discussed what they think makes them American, and it turns out that they appeared frequently in the policy-related portions of the interviews as well. Some participants justify their support for the ELA by appealing to this unfortunate American tradition, and others explain their opposition by condemning it.

Ethnocultural discourse accounts for 16 percent of the policy-related thoughts analyzed here. Seventy-two percent of these thoughts accept the ethnocultural tradition and 28 percent reject it. Most anti-ethnocultural sentiments—53 percent—came from the three Hispanic groups, 25 percent came from the all-white groups, and the rest came from the heterogeneous groups. On the flip side, most endorsements—72 percent—came from the all-white groups and 25 percent came from the heterogeneous groups. Again, it is not surprising to find that ethnicity affects whether people see the ELA as a tool to promote ethnic exclusions. Yet, as before, the critiques of ethnoculturalism are not confined to Hispanics.

Table 6.5 lists aspects of ethnoculturalism included in the coding scheme along with 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 IS AMERICAN

The most common ethnocultural idea invoked to express support for making English the official language was that the English language is an integral part of American identity. More than asserting the virtues of having a common language, these statements reflected an attachment to English in particular and account for 62 percent of all ethnocultural comments made in support of official-English and 38 percent of all ethnocultural thoughts claiming that people living in the United States should speak English.<sup>16</sup> A common example comes from Jacob, a member of a hobby group, who said, “If they’re going to live here, they should speak our language, the language.” Another comes from Denise, in a career-related organization, who argues, “It’s time for the government to simply say this is a country that speaks English and that’s what we’re going to use as our official language.” Josie, in the public-speaking

<sup>16</sup> Of the participants who used the centrality of English to American identity to argue that everyone in America should know English, 90 percent also supported the ELA elsewhere.

TABLE 6.5  
Ethnoculturalism and Language Policy Preferences

Ethnocultural Categories	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/ethnocultural 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 ethnocultural tendencies in America	0	11	0	0	2
Need to fight ethnoculturalism	0	2	0	0	2
Not American because not white and blonde	0	0	0	0	0
(Subtotal)	(0)	(36)	(0)	(0)	(4)
Total	37	36	2	0	69

group, also thinks that we should make English official because it would reaffirm her image of who Americans are. She says, “When in Rome, you do as the Romans do. You join a country. You participate in its culture. We cannot deny that we are a culture of English-speaking people.”

#### 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. People recalled the good old days when their relatives came through Ellis Island and worked hard at becoming American. They regret that those days are gone and that today’s immigrants are of a different breed. These comparisons make up 14 percent of ethnocultural thoughts in favor of the ELA and 26 per-

cent of ethnocultural thoughts arguing for everyone to know English.<sup>17</sup> Merle (quoted earlier) is critical of immigrant groups whose members do not know English, and he compares them to what he says immigrants used to be like:

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, in the same group, adds:

One of the big differences that I see is the attitude of the people today. You know, we've had a couple of people [here] say that their parents spoke a particular language [and] they encouraged the children to learn English. 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 reveal 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 way people voiced 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.<sup>18</sup> Shelly, a member of a hobby club, illustrates this entrenched ethnocultural tendency to assume that language minorities are not American when she complains about hearing other languages around town:

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

She feels that people who do not speak English or who have accents that make their English difficult to understand are not respecting that they are guests in

<sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> Again, all participants who used these ethnocultural images to argue that everyone in America should know English also supported the ELA elsewhere in the discussions or on the pre-survey.

her home. It does not enter her consciousness to distinguish between ethnic minorities who are and are not citizens.

A more incisive attack comes from Leslie, a member of one of the career-related organizations, who not only disparages minorities for not knowing English but also suggests that many of them are faking it:

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

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

#### REJECTION OF ETHNOCULTURALISM

Not all people who incorporate the language of ethnoculturalism into their vocabulary do so as a show of endorsement. As I showed in chapter 5, many people are critical of America's ethnocultural legacy. Here, objections to this tradition are common reasons for being against the ELA. Not surprisingly, anti-ethnocultural statements account for all of the ethnocultural discourse that opposed official-English legislation. This type of opposition was not confined to 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 percent of Hispanic participants versus 10 percent 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. And I think that we

less and less want other people in this country, even though new immigrants are certainly contributing to the country. 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 refusing to accept its narrow definition of who does and does not belong.

Some people interpreted the proposed amendment as a backlash against the growing number of Hispanics in the United States. Most participants who voiced this concern were of Hispanic descent. Participants in one of the Hispanic groups in the study touched upon the anti-Hispanic tone they sensed in the ELA. The following is an excerpt of their responses when asked what they would say about the language issue to their local representative in Congress if they had his ear for five minutes. They said they would ask the politician to address their fears that the ELA is meant to remind Hispanics that they are not true Americans:

MARIA JOSE: I think I would need to know more as far as exactly what their intentions are in that bill before I could really say whether I'd be against it or not. I really want to know what are they trying to limit or are they trying to limit anything? What are the issues behind it and what the effects will be, truly.

VELMA: But they would not really say, "We are targeting Hispanics."

MARIA JOSE: That's what I'm saying. I would want to make sure, I would want to know like are there going to be . . .

JANET: There's no way you could make sure of that. You can't make sure. I would tell these people, "no." We don't have a law right now. Everything is in English anyway. . . .

MANOLO: You give them a little bit and they'll take a lot.

ANTONIO: It's a dangerous document. . . . Because of what we've been talking about, that it could be interpreted in different ways. . . .

MANOLO: It's like maybe an indirect way of white America trying to tell Hispanics to stay in their place.

#### SUMMARY

It would be misleading to say that certain aspects of the ethnocultural tradition are associated with support for official-English legislation while other aspects are associated with opposition. The defining element of ethnoculturalism—an ascriptive basis for national identity—is central to both policy preferences. The main difference between those who use ethnoculturalism for support and those who use it for opposition is whether they endorse or reject it. 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.

People in the focus groups are less guarded than pro-official-English activists tend to be. One won't find statements like Shelly's or Leslie's on the website for U.S. English, for example. There are indeed official-English activists who do make ethnocultural statements, but they tend to be fringe elements. Ordinary citizens, on the other hand, are not in the public eye, which permits their ethnocultural attachments to emerge. 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.<sup>19</sup> 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*

In rejecting the ethnocultural conception of American identity, some participants offer an explicit alternative, one that is derived from our immigrant legacy. To understand the nature of American identity and to contemplate how the nation should address language issues, this immigrant tradition needs to be taken into account. But to confuse matters, people who reject ethnoculturalism are not the only ones to draw upon incorporationism for inspiration; that the United States is a nation of immigrants is acknowledged and respected by nearly all participants in the study. As I showed in chapter 5, one understanding of the immigrant legacy emphasizes ethnic distinctions, while another focuses on the assimilative powers of American society. Given the prominent role that incorporationism played in discussions about American identity, it makes sense to look for such discourse in debates about language policy.

It turns out, however, that the occurrence of incorporationism pales in comparison to the occurrence of liberalism, civic republicanism, and ethnoculturalism. It accounts for just 4 percent of the completed thoughts in the policy-related discussions. Only 36 thoughts both invoke incorporationism and explicitly express either support for or opposition to restrictive language policies. This number may be small, yet as table 6.6 indicates, a pattern still emerges. Table 6.6 lists the manifestations of incorporationism in the coding scheme and shows the number of thoughts that invoke each one for each policy position. The data show that the multicultural version of incorporationism

<sup>19</sup> 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 were couched in the language of ethnoculturalism. To be faithful to the dialogue, unless the speaker specifically mentioned phrases like "discrimination" and "rights," these thoughts were coded as being anti-ethnocultural rather than pro-liberal.

TABLE 6.6  
Incorporationism and Language Policy Preferences

Incorporationist Categories	Official-English		English-only Ballots		All Should Know English
	For	Against	For	Against	
<i>Multiculturalism</i>					
U.S. characterized by distinct cultures	2	5	0	0	2
Important to maintain differences	0	1	0	0	5
Laments loss of culture	0	1	0	0	1
Critical of melting pot myth	0	0	0	0	0
Government to help maintain differences	0	0	0	0	0
(Subtotal)	(2)	(7)	(0)	(0)	(8)
<i>Melting Pot Assimilationism</i>					
U.S. characterized by cultural assimilation	0	0	0	0	7
Melting as blending/ "American" as dynamic	0	1	0	0	3
Vague references to the melting pot	1	0	0	0	2
Government to help with assimilation	3	0	0	0	1
(Subtotal)	(4)	(1)	(0)	(0)	(13)
Other incorporationism/ incorporationism hybrid	0	1	0	0	0
Total	6	9	0	0	21

is associated with opposition to language restrictions, whereas melting pot assimilationism is associated with support.<sup>20</sup> It also shows that this conception of national identity is not called forth to discuss the issue of bilingual voting ballots. Civic republicanism is clearly the main conception of American identity that this policy invokes.

#### MULTICULTURALISM

Of the nine incorporationist thoughts that emphasize cultural distinctiveness and voice an opinion about making English official, seven express opposition. An example of using multicultural sentiments to oppose the ELA comes from Maribel:

<sup>20</sup> Fisher's exact test yields  $p < 0.148$ .

If you look back into the history of the United States, many, many, many states, before they even became states, had other languages as . . . written everywhere. German was spoken in many places. Even signs, the stores, a lot of the legal documents were written in the language of many different communities that created the United States as we know it today. So we've been in contact with many different languages in this country, and laws and different other government official-use documents have been written in other languages in the past, so I don't know why now . . . [doesn't finish the sentence]

According to Maribel, there has never been a time when the American public was not characterized by a multiplicity of cultures and languages, and the country has managed to get along just fine thus far. Other thoughts that used multicultural interpretations of the incorporationist tradition to express opposition to official-English made similar arguments.

Table 6.6 shows that twenty-one thoughts invoke incorporationism to argue that people living in the United States should speak English. Eight were coded as being multicultural in nature. No single argument characterizes these thoughts. Some people said that knowing English is necessary to be truly able to celebrate and appreciate each other's cultures and backgrounds. One person said it is better to do everything in English if one can, but that accommodations should be made for the many people who cannot do everything in English. And there were still others, like Merle, who talked about the importance of knowing English to get by but also acknowledged the value of preserving one's own cultural heritage:

Well, what I'm trying to say is, I think it's so important to learn the English language. Now . . . I think people realize that it's important to keep their heritage too. I would want, if I ever have children, I would want my children to learn the Italian language, you know, and also be proficient in the English language.

Merle wants his descendants to be connected to where they came from and to be able to take pride in their Italian background. He is not talking about an evolving national character or praising the melting pot. Rather, he is aware of the need to learn English but also wants the Italian part of his heritage to remain a distinct part of the family's identity. Only about half of the participants who used multicultural discourse to say everyone should speak English indicated elsewhere that they support the ELA.<sup>21</sup>

#### MELTING POT ASSIMILATIONISM

A technique I use throughout my analysis is to examine thoughts that say everyone should speak English and to look for whether the people who invoke a given value to make that argument also indicate support for governmental regulation. If there is a perfect or near-perfect overlap, as there is in the case of people who say everyone should know English because that is what the good

<sup>21</sup> None of the multicultural statements advocated "hard" multiculturalism.

immigrants from earlier generations did, I can conclude that the value in question most likely leads to support for language restrictions on a consistent basis. If there is little or no overlap, I can conclude that the value in question points to a respect for the virtues that having a common language can bring but does not necessarily imply the next step of favoring governmental regulation. The case of melting pot assimilationism illustrates why this approach is useful. My assertion that the assimilationist version of incorporationism leads to support for language restrictions rests primarily on the fact that all people who referred to America's assimilative powers in arguing that everyone should know English also indicated elsewhere that they support the ELA.

First, notice that four of the six incorporationist statements in favor of making English the official language invoke an assimilationist stance, which suggests that this image might lead to support for official-English. But if the thirteen assimilationist thoughts in favor of everyone knowing English are spoken by people who are against the ELA, then the data would become more difficult to interpret. It turns out that all speakers who used assimilationist rhetoric to say that everyone should know English say elsewhere that they support the ELA, a pattern that is in stark contrast to the multicultural version of incorporationism. Here, people talked about how what it means to be American evolves over time, and they argued that a common language has helped the multiplicity of cultures come together to form this new thing called American identity. Learning English is seen as a part of the process of becoming American. As we have seen in many instances before, a participant's desire for people to know English slides easily into support for an official-English proposal. It is not always the case that these two sentiments go together (as we saw in the liberal case of economic opportunity), but they do in the case of melting pot assimilationism.

#### SUMMARY

The relationship between incorporationism and language policy preferences is difficult to untangle. The immigrant legacy does not seem to provide much help to the participants in my study as they try to make sense of complex debates about language. Instead, they primarily discuss language debates in terms of rights, economic opportunity, political participation, and America's ethnocultural past. Yet many participants describe the United States as a nation of immigrants and use incorporationism to describe what they think being American means. And the few incorporationist thoughts that do appear display rather clear patterns.

One could reasonably argue that the anti-ethnocultural statements described in the previous section are implicit endorsements of multiculturalist incorporationism. I chose to include them under the umbrella of ethnoculturalism because they do not explicitly advocate an alternative, but if those statements are counted as incorporationist, then incorporationism's share of the

policy-related discourse doubles to 8 percent, with the lion's share of that portion arguing against the ELA (and ethnoculturalism's share drops from 16 to 12 percent).<sup>22</sup> Even so, this 8 percent still lags behind the other three. Although the image of the United States as a nation of immigrants is a powerful one, it was not spontaneously brought to bear as frequently in this policy area as liberalism, civic republicanism, and ethnoculturalism. Given the apparent affinity between the myth of the melting pot and concrete policy debates about issues that arise from ethnic change, the comparatively small number of incorporationist comments among the focus group participants when they debated the ELA is curious and suggests that further investigation into the role that this conception of national identity plays in the American mind is needed.

#### DELIBERATION AMID CONFLICT AND CONSENSUS

Throughout the analysis in these past two chapters, 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 this chapter with another observation in this regard, particularly in light of the growing interest in deliberative democracy and debates about 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 and Oleske 2000; Sanders 1997). My focus groups by no means provide definitive answers to these questions, but they do exhibit 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 groups (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

<sup>22</sup> With anti-ethnocultural thoughts counted as incorporationist, Fisher's exact test yields  $p < 0.001$ .

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 said that if they did, they would come to feel as the group felt. Although this is hardly strong evidence of increased dogmatism (aka group polarization), consensus groups did convey that they wanted other Americans to “see the light.” Without contrasting interpretations being offered, members in consensus groups behave as Elder and Cobb (1983) would expect. Recall Elder and Cobb’s assertion that people often fail to recognize that prominent symbols in the political sphere can have divergent interpretations and meanings “because all [people] 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” (10). In consensus groups, participants indeed share common interpretations of enduring symbols and assume that other Americans would share them too, if only they stopped to think about it.

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, 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.<sup>23</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

The four conceptions of American national identity under investigation here provide cognitive tools for Americans to interpret the issues that arise from ethnic change. The ideas associated with these conceptions featured prominently when participants explained their attitudes toward restrictive language

<sup>23</sup> 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 and Oleske 2000).

policies. People who support making English the official language and printing election ballots only in English justify these policies as ways to promote either economic self-sufficiency (liberalism), a greater sense of national and local unity, or a common basis for communication (civic republicanism). Others justify support for restrictive policies by arguing that the United States is too “balkanized,” that uninformed people threaten the integrity of the voting process (civic republicanism), that the English language is an integral part of American identity, that today’s immigrants are a “letdown” (ethnoculturalism), or that language laws will help to stir the melting pot (incorporationism). That the proposed legislation is not seen as crossing the sacred line between public and private (liberalism) also provides a way for people to express their support. Alternatively, people are more likely to oppose restrictive policies if they fear that these laws will violate civil rights (liberalism), exclude minorities from the political process (civic republicanism), or promote the idea that Americans should all look and sound alike (ethnoculturalism). Others oppose the ELA when they think that it would be an affront to America’s immigrant legacy (incorporationism). Finally, people also oppose the ELA when they feel that language issues should be dealt with on a community-by-community basis (civic republicanism).

This analysis demonstrates that enduring conceptions of what it means to be an American affect how people interpret public policies that address issues of language and immigration, but that the relationship between identity and opinion is not as straightforward as previous research would suggest. The liberal, civic republican, and incorporationist conceptions of American identity are internally conflictual, and ethnoculturalism is contested. These tensions have been overlooked by more traditional survey-based analyses. It turns out that the only straightforward relationship between identity and language policy preferences is that when ethnoculturalism is endorsed, it leads to support for restrictive language policies and when it is rejected, it leads to opposition. Endorsements of liberal, civic republican, or incorporationist norms could go either way, depending on the particular aspect of each one that comes to mind, and the ethnocultural tradition provides a target for some of the most vehement opposition to making English the official language.

So why is it that people sometimes employ civic traditions in seemingly contradictory ways? What factors determine whether a person will zero in on freedom of speech while another will concentrate on English as a means of achieving economic success? Why does a concern for an informed citizenry lead to support for official-English for some people but to opposition for others? While there are many potential explanations, it is very likely that individual-level social and demographic factors play a key role in determining these trajectories. Ethnicity, for example, seems to be a potent determinant of preferences and of the justifications for those preferences among the Hispanic participants, although it was less straightforward as a determinant for whites.

The kinds of independent variables used in the statistical models in chapter 4 are all worthy contenders in explaining whether there is any systematic component to the findings described here. As Chavez (2001) writes:

Key symbols may be universally recognized within a society but the meanings attached to a symbol may be subject to contestation, reformulation, or refraction by the reader . . . because readers bring with them different histories and power positions within society. Issues of gender, race, class, age, language, immigrant history, and citizenship status all frame the give and take that forms the process by which meaning is communicated. (36)

Focus groups, however, are limited in the extent to which they can isolate the independent role each of these factors plays for individuals in shaping how national symbols are interpreted and employed. They are best at revealing the patterns discussed in this chapter, but are less useful for examining these individual-level relationships. The challenge now is to combine the insights from the focus groups with the strengths of survey analysis to pursue the questions raised by my findings. Yet as I have argued at various points, existing surveys are not up to the task. Thus, an important next step in this research agenda will be to design surveys that are capable of carrying out such tests and of exploring how endorsements of particular conceptions of American identity interact with individual-level characteristics.

The matrix of influences regarding how symbols are interpreted and how they factor into the opinion formation process includes individual-level demographic and attitudinal factors, the prevailing norms of the day, and the framing of particular policy debates by elites and activists. The analysis in this book has so far taken several steps in putting these pieces together in the realm of language policy. I have focused on establishing the prevailing norms regarding national identity, examining how those norms are invoked by elites to advance their preferred policies, and showing how ordinary Americans rely on them when sorting out their views on this complex and contentious issue area. The individual-level determinants need further study, a task that depends on future survey analysis with appropriate question design. The focus groups do not allow for neat conclusions about the causal story underlying individual-level patterns. But they do allow relationships between broad conceptions of American identity, their particular manifestations, and policy preferences to be studied in a way that surveys do not.

The analysis in this chapter points to some other conclusions that are also worthy of future investigation. One in particular is that the factors that drive support for one policy may differ from the factors that drive support for another. Two seemingly similar policies can have different levels and *causes* of support among the public. As tables 6.3 through 6.6 show, the issue of bilingual ballots does not elicit liberalism, ethnoculturalism, or incorporationism. The cognitive link between ballots and participation appears to be strictly

civic republican in nature. The ideals embodied in the civic republican tradition provide a more useful framework than the ideals embodied in the other traditions for thinking about the merits and drawbacks of printing election materials in more than one language. This phenomenon is even more pronounced in the discussions regarding bilingual education, which were largely driven by concerns about effectiveness rather than identity, as I demonstrate in chapter 7. In short, the considerations that inform preferences will vary even though the policies being examined are derived from a common political issue. I elaborate on the differences across policy domains and on other factors that are at work in the processes discussed thus far in the next chapter.