

Multicultural America: A Multimedia Encyclopedia

Official English Movement

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The Official English movement is a political effort to establish English as the official language of the United States. Although English is overwhelmingly used in state and national governmental operations, the United States has no de jure or legal language policy, so organizations that support “English-Only” or “English as the Official Language” work to pass laws at the local, state, and national levels. Supporters believe that Official English amendments reaffirm the status of English, urge immigrants to assimilate, and caution governmental agencies against spending tax dollars on bilingual services. Critics of Official English contend that the movement, by coercing mainstream conformity, endangers the rich cultural and linguistic diversity that can be both an individual resource and a societal boon.

There are various groups that champion an English language amendment—such as U.S. English, English First, and ProEnglish. In addition to the notion that making English the single language used in public and governmental operations would unify the nation, mission statements of Official English groups cite American patriotism, a national heritage, and the symbolic importance of having one language along with one flag. English-Only advocates maintain that multilingual policies are costly, are ineffective, and foster immigrants’ tendency to segregate.

They argue that decreasing multilingual services—such as with voting ballots, drivers’ exams, emergency operators, and interpreting and translating options—would encourage immigrants to integrate and in turn improve their economic prosperity. In conjunction, eliminating bilingual education in schools and increasing English proficiency requirements for citizenship would send a strong message about the importance of knowing English. Advocates of Official English fear that, without these efforts, the primacy of the English language is in danger and linguistic disunity could lead to ethnic separatism.

Opponents of the Official English movement agree that English proficiency is vital to personal and professional well-being but differ in the means to this goal. They emphasize that the United States already has a de facto language policy because the vast majority of businesses and governmental entities operate in English. Therefore, there is no need for a law to protect or promote its use. According to those opposing

the Official English movement, people who are not yet proficient in English are already highly motivated to improve their fluency for both social and economic reasons.

The ideology of the Official English movement can be seen as the linguistic equivalent of the “melting pot,” where cultural differences are deemphasized or erased in order for minority residents to “assimilate” and blend into the dominant society. The belief follows that minority languages interfere with English acquisition and are better “subtracted.” The opposing position encourages individuals to “acculturate” into the multicultural mosaic of the United States, adding mainstream knowledge and ways-of-being to beneficial features of a home culture. The additive linguistic view sees humans as capable of utilizing multiple languages, as evidenced in Europe and countries with regional dialects. As such, [p. 1635 ↓] adding an additional language while developing one's native tongue is personally and professionally beneficial.

In addition to addressing speakers of minority languages, the additive philosophy extends to majority or fluent English speakers. If everyone knew English *plus* another language—the English-Plus approach—individuals and companies would be prepared for the global marketplace. Native English speakers would have more opportunities to learn a second language, especially at younger ages in K-12 dual immersion programs, while English learners would have greater access to language acquisition classes via schools, employers, and community organizations. According to English-Plus advocates, promoting multilingual skills is more effective in unifying the country and ensuring national security.

Advocates of English-Plus argue that English-Only laws and policies not only are unnecessary and counterproductive but also have negatively impacted the psychosocial and material well-being of English learners. They have restricted the individual rights of those who are not yet English-proficient and, in many cases, have been found to be unconstitutional. Even when courts overturn English-Only referenda, there can be discriminatory consequences. Misinformation or “language vigilantism” ensues, such as students being penalized for speaking their native language and employees being prohibited from using languages other than English in the workplace. Overt connections between the Official English movement and anti-immigrant efforts have spurred allegations of racism and xenophobia. Some organizations have been classified as hate groups by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Whether the intentions of the Official English movement are a proxy for fostering anti-minority sentiment will continue to be debated, but arguably a more constructive way to promote the majority language would be to expand programs and resources to learn English. To date, no English-only bill has addressed the perpetual shortage of English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Moreover, longitudinal data show that native language support improves the acquisition of a second or additional language. Although this may seem counterintuitive to those unfamiliar with research supporting late-exit bilingual and dual-language education, true advocates of English proficiency recognize the benefits of utilizing—not restricting—the native language.

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See Also:

Further Readings

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