

E Pluribus Unum

How bilingualism strengthens American democracy.

The United States is in the midst of a demographic reordering, brought on by levels of immigration unprecedented in American history. The numbers are staggering: Between 1971 and 2000, nearly 20 million immigrants came to the United States legally—almost two million more people than entered between 1891 and 1920, the last major period of migration-fueled transformation. Of course, as a percentage of total U.S. population, immigrants today represent a smaller cohort than at the turn of the twentieth century, but the acceleration of migration in recent years has been dramatic nevertheless. Between 2000 and 2005, approximately 7.9 million immigrants arrived here—the largest number in any single five-year period in American history. By 2002, more than 20 percent of the population of the United States consisted of immigrants or their children. Add to these totals the nearly 12 million unauthorized immigrants estimated to be present, and it's no wonder

CRISTINA RODRÍGUEZ *is an assistant professor at the New York University School of Law.*

that the immigration debate has roiled the country.

As the number of immigrants entering the United States has reached historic highs, a variety of familiar anti-immigration arguments have surfaced in the public debate: National security is at risk, public safety is being undermined, and American workers are losing their jobs. But the trope most often invoked—across historical periods and the political spectrum—is of immigration as a cultural threat. In this view, demographic trends threaten to dilute the common national culture that sustains the unity essential to our self-government. A nation in which salsa replaces ketchup as the nation’s favorite condiment, and in which public parks are filled with pick-up soccer games as opposed to basketball or baseball, is a nation changed. More than that, some fear, it is a fractured nation in which democracy becomes increasingly difficult to sustain.

Throughout American history, the cultural bogeyman has taken various forms. It has been defined by race, as with the Chinese, who were subjected to draconian exclusion laws in the late nineteenth century and declared inherently inassimilable by Justice John Marshall Harlan, just as he was condemning racial segregation in his famous *Plessy v. Ferguson* dissent. It has been given religious form, with warning bells sounded about criminal Italian Catholics and venal Eastern European Jews—the two groups that dominated the last period of large-scale immigration. And the arrival of new ethnic groups has been linked by opponents to grave political and national security threats, leading to the swift disappearance, in the wake of World War I and Theodore Roosevelt’s Americanization campaigns, of formerly robust German-language schools, newspapers, and clubs, and the deportation of many Eastern European “radicals” to Russia during the same period, for fear of their Bolshevism.

Today, these prejudices seem almost quaint. Chinese-, Italian-, German- and Jewish-Americans have achieved success at all levels of American society. Racial and religious pluralism, in particular, are widely accepted as fixed (though often anxiety-producing) features of American society; relatively few claim our survival as a nation depends on racial or religious uniformity. But the impulse toward homogeneity and the suspicion of foreigners have not disappeared, they have just taken another form. At least as they are expressed in polite company, these tendencies are most often articulated in linguistic terms. Public figures, opinion writers, and lawmakers at all levels venerate the English language as the glue that provides cohesion in an otherwise impossibly diverse immigrant society—what makes *e pluribus unum* possible.

Consider the English-only ordinances that have been passed by a number of states and municipalities in the last year. They declare English to be our common language and emphasize that universal use of English “removes barriers of

misunderstanding” and “helps to enable the full economic and civic participation” of all citizens, justifying government efforts “promoting, preserving, and strengthening” the English language. During last year’s Senate debate over whether to adopt a national language, James Inhofe of Oklahoma worried that by taking in “great numbers of immigrants,” we are “overwhelming the assimilation process and creating... linguistic ghettos.” Lamar Alexander of Tennessee declared that nothing could be more important when debating immigration reform than “talking about our common language,” which enables us to “take our magnificent diversity and make it even more magnificent.” And despite his skepticism of the Republican-sponsored bill, Ken Salazar of Colorado, one of only two Latinos serving in the upper chamber, offered his own amendment, supported by large numbers of Democrats, declaring that “English is the common and unifying language of the United States that helps provide unity for the people of the United States.”

Though the bulk of today’s immigrants come from multilingual corners of Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean, the language that motivates policymakers’ concerns is Spanish—a language simultaneously associated with immigration-fueled transformation and an old history of manifest destiny, imperial adventure, and civil rights struggles. Indeed, as commentators have observed, the Spanish language is to the United States today what the Islamic veil is to Western Europe—the potent symbol around which the assimilation debate turns. In both societies, the symbol is described as an impediment to mutual understanding, and in both societies, the symbol’s prevalence, whether real or perceived, challenges the cultural security of the general population.

This perception of a new cultural threat in the United States is compounded by the fact that immigrants are increasingly settling not just in border states or big cities but throughout the South and Midwest. In towns across the country, residents are interacting with Latin American immigrants for the very first time. Communities unaccustomed to incorporating immigrants now hear foreign languages in public spaces, see Spanish signs on storefronts, and grapple with the challenge of a sizable non-English-speaking student body in the public schools.

This new challenge is one of the factors that has prompted state legislatures and local governments in the last few years to debate and adopt a slew of measures designed to control immigrants and those with whom immigrants associate. Most of the “illegal immigration relief” acts passed by cities and towns, as

The Spanish language is to the United States what the Islamic veil is to Western Europe—the potent symbol around which the assimilation debate turns.

well as most laws passed by states, explicitly address illegal immigration. But it would be naïve to assume that the problem of illegality is the only force driving this phenomenon. Many immigration-control measures have been accompanied by official declarations that limit the government's authority to operate in languages other than English—measures that affect U.S. citizens, legal immigrants, and illegal immigrants alike. In some corners, the defense of English has been taken to extremes. In one Georgia town, for example, a local minister was prosecuted in 1999 under an English-only sign ordinance for advertising his church services to the community in Spanish. A Chicago public school gained notoriety last December for requiring students to sign a pledge vowing not to speak Spanish while on school grounds. And in Tennessee in 2005, a child-court judge made headlines for ordering a Spanish-speaking mother involved in neglect and custody disputes to take English classes or risk losing her children.

But this fixation on language as the marker of assimilation and the source of unity, while understandable, is misplaced. The fact that immigrants speak their mother tongues does not mean that they are not integrating in profound ways—that immigrants aren't contributing to the economy, investing in their neighborhoods, or becoming involved in politics. On the flip side, complete linguistic assimilation does not necessarily indicate that immigrants have become meaningfully integrated: Consider the linguistically assimilated but otherwise disaffected second generation of Muslim immigrants in Europe.

In fact, the drive toward linguistic homogeneity makes the absorption of immigrants more difficult and saps American democracy of vitality. Bilingual individuals, institutions with multilingual capacity, and even a self-conception as an English-dominant but linguistically diverse nation are indispensable to a successful, self-governing American polity, particularly in an increasingly interdependent world. Though it may seem counterintuitive, bilingualism promotes the integration of immigrants and ethnic minorities, enables effective citizen participation, and strengthens our democracy and nation. In other words, we should be promoting bilingualism, not fighting it.

American Immigration: Three Schools of Thought

Currently, almost no one argues the democratic case for bilingualism. Instead, three schools of thought dominate the debate: conservative or “thick” assimilationism, multiculturalism, and liberal assimilationism. With political scientist Samuel Huntington as their academic standard-bearer, conservative assimilationists like George Will and Newt Gingrich, who have called for an end to bilingual ballots, and the likes of Senators Inhofe and Alexander, who along with Lindsay Graham of South Carolina co-sponsored the national language

bill, warn that today's immigrants, particularly those from Latin America, resist learning English. This resistance demonstrates an unwillingness to participate in American life and threatens the perpetuation of important public values. As Huntington put it, "[t]here is no Americano dream. There is only the American dream created by an Anglo-Protestant society. Mexican Americans will share in that dream and in that society only if they dream in English." To conservative assimilationists, public services translated into languages other than English seem like a costly crutch; bilingual ballots appear to threaten a political community that depends on mutual understanding; and bilingual education looks destined to create ethnic ghettos.

On the other hand, multiculturalists weigh in by contesting the notion of assimilation altogether. As Nathan Glazer has explained in his work on multiculturalism, the "melting pot" has lost its universal appeal in multicultural circles, because the idea of assimilation "suggests forced conformity," stands "opposed to the reality of individual and group difference," and fails to recognize and celebrate those differences. Because of its association with historical practices of coercion and domination, the rhetoric of assimilation is presumptively suspect to the multiculturalist.

Bilingualism promotes the integration of immigrants and ethnic minorities, enables effective participation, and strengthens our democracy.

Finally, liberal assimilationists, who have responded to Huntington in the pages of the *American Prospect* and the *New York Review of Books*, adopt a posture of empirically supported avoidance, diffusing the conservative critique by emphasizing that Latin American immigrants are assimilating according to the standard "three-generation" pattern. Virtually no one in the so-called third generation, the rebuttal goes, speaks the language of his or her grandparents. Liberal assimilationists draw support from the latest sociological research, such as a recent study in which social scientists Rubén Rumbaut, Douglas Massey, and Frank Bean describe the United States as a "graveyard for languages" and document that Spanish-language usage readily disappears across generations, even in areas of Latino concentration.

Each of these positions contains important insights. Conservative assimilationists are correct in observing that the English language runs as a unifying thread through a deeply diverse population, and immigrant advancement does depend heavily on knowledge of English. But, as the liberal assimilationists point out, this insight is hardly lost on immigrants themselves, who fill waiting lists for oversubscribed English-as-a-second-language classes. And the core of the

multiculturalists' position remains compelling—ethnic subcultures not only give the life of the individual added meaning, but they also create cohesive local communities and represent influential and valuable dimensions of American history and culture. But, while advocates for these three schools of thought often find themselves at odds, these positions can in fact be bridged if we leave the Ivory Tower and see how the language issue actually plays out on the ground.

The New Multilingual Reality

Whether lawmakers succeed in passing comprehensive immigration reform, we can expect continued large-scale migration, particularly from Latin America and Asia. As sociologists Mary Waters and Tomás Jiménez have shown, one of the novelties of the current wave of immigration is the way in which ongoing flows of migration will replenish immigrant communities for the foreseeable future. This replenishment means that linguistic diversity will remain a demographic reality, even as the children and grandchildren of immigrants become native and exclusive English-speakers. Thus, based on the 2000 census, we can project that the majority of people in the United States, by 2044, will speak a language other than English. And some researchers speculate that English-Spanish bilingualism may persist more strongly in the third generation than in the past, in part because of the replenishment Waters and Jiménez document, and in part because geographic proximity and technological advancements make connections with Latin America relatively easy to sustain. America's linguistic profile, therefore, will continue to consist of a "mutability continuum," or of complex speech communities made up of non-English-speakers, individuals in the process of learning English, bilinguals, and monolingual English-speakers with connections of varying intensity to their fellow ethnics. No amount of rhetoric about the importance of linguistic commonality will dislodge the reality that the non-English-speaking immigrant and his bilingual descendants will continue to be significant parts of American society.

To the conservative assimilationist, this linguistic diversity means that we are in danger of being unable to communicate with one another. But that assumes that civic engagement involves one simultaneous national conversation—with knowledge of English as the prerequisite for joining. But our public conversations are far more varied than this model admits. Public dialogue consists of innumerable conversations in multiple media and in any number of languages. In fact, genuine dialogue depends on this variety of conversations. Only a small number of voices actually can be heard and then expressed by the national media. Subsidiary media, such as the local and ethnic press and the blogosphere, which inevitably target particular social groups, arise to give voice

to the rest of us. In a country that will continue to be linguistically diverse, no matter how long or high a wall we build along our borders, multilingual dialogue will continue to be essential to national debate. Conservatives may not like it, but it's the reality we face.

The immigration reform debate that culminated in nationwide demonstrations in May 2006 provides a case in point. It was as close to a national debate as one could imagine, but it had a wide variety of focal points—from President George Bush's first major speech on the subject in 2004 to the machinations on Capitol Hill, the public discourse filtered through mainstream media, debates in local communities covered by local press, and the organizing efforts within immigrant communities. For a truly national conversation on the important matter of immigration reform to have occurred, all of these stakeholders, including immigrants themselves, had to be involved. The only way universal participation in this debate could be ensured was through the mobilization of multilingual resources in the form of the English- and Spanish-language media, bilingual organizers, and members of the general public and the political classes capable of understanding the multiple strands of the dialogue.

To be sure, there are those who lament the growing influence of the Spanish-language media and bemoan its growth as a sign of an increasingly fractured body politic. But given today's demographic realities, it simply cannot be any different. An immigrant's inability to speak English is not a sign of refusal to learn, but rather a sign that the process of learning a new language, not to mention becoming capable of expressing complex ideas with ease in a new language, takes time. If we want immigrants to be a part of American society, we need to embrace these non-English media outlets, not condemn them.

After all, contrary to the assimilationists' lament, the growth of the Spanish-language media has not isolated Spanish-speakers. According to a 2004 study by the Pew Hispanic Center, only 6 percent of likely voters in the Hispanic population access all of their news in Spanish; 53 percent access news only in English, and 44 percent rely on media in both languages. In the Latino population as a whole, at least 60 percent of the foreign-born consume news in English, a practice that grows in regularity the more time one spends in the United States. Rather than isolating Latinos, then, the Spanish-language media expand their horizons by creating new opportunities for information-gathering for bilinguals and by enabling those who have not yet become proficient in English to take part in debates of public concern. And, as the study documents, by presenting more extensive coverage of events outside the United States, and by generally portraying Latinos in a more favorable light than the English-language media, the Spanish-language media provide a crucial and distinct perspective—an

inherently valuable contribution to a society that values freedom of thought and progress through the exchange of diverse ideas.

Bilingualism and Decentralization

Of course, the type of wide-ranging national debate embodied by the immigration marches is rare. More often, pressing issues are debated at the local and regional level, reflecting the decentralization of our federal system and geography. Therefore, the rules of the political game, including the linguistic rules, can and should be tailored to fit the varied characteristics of the population. For instance, a municipal ordinance requiring the translation of certain essential services into six languages is both necessary and possible in New York City, where multiple language groups make up the body politic, but less necessary in a smaller and

To the ranks of conservative assimilationists, public services translated into languages other than English seem like a costly crutch for immigrants.

more homogeneous city in the same state, such as Binghamton. The staging of a Spanish-language debate in Texas during the 2002 democratic gubernatorial primaries resonated with a politically significant segment of the population, not because these voters lacked the capacity to understand an English-language debate, but because it

signaled the important status of Mexican Americans in the political community, thus enhancing their connection to and participation in politics. And in New Mexico, a state with a deep Spanish-English bilingual tradition, it made sense for the state supreme court to interpret its constitution to require the accommodation of citizens who speak neither Spanish nor English, so that they too could participate in community governance by serving on a jury.

Beyond the federal structure of the United States, which allows for a degree of regional variation, there are other decentralized aspects of participation worth considering. To strengthen participation, we must also focus on decentralized institutions, or the places where most of our public engagement unfolds, such as the workplace, public schools, local social institutions, and neighborhoods. These are the spheres in which we spend most of our waking hours and develop our vocabulary and capacities for public engagement. Meaningful participation in these mid-level institutions depends on forms of engagement with deep roots in the characteristics of the community, rather than forms of interaction modeled on a perfectionist image of the national body politic.

What effect does bilingualism have in these venues? For one, when public institutions can deliver translated or interpreted services, they make themselves

comprehensible and useful to non-English-speakers, thus engendering confidence in the government and its officials. Law-enforcement authorities with multilingual capacities, for example, are better positioned to build trust in the immigrant communities than officials unable to communicate in other languages. Public schools with multilingual resources at their disposal are better positioned to educate non-English-speaking students and involve their parents in the educational enterprise, thus facilitating the integration of students and parents alike. Hospitals and government agencies with the capacity to communicate with non-English-speaking communities not only perform their functions more effectively, but they also increase the willingness of immigrants to engage public institutions. A given institution's ability to develop this communicative capacity may be limited by budgetary constraints, and the commitment to providing translation and interpretation may not make sense until a language group passes a numerical threshold. But, as a general matter, we should regard public investment in language services as an essential mechanism of immigrant integration, not as costly insulation of immigrants from the demands of assimilation. As Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont has put it, “[I]s it not in the interests of all Americans to have every member of our society as well-informed on matters of health, safety, and our democracy as possible?”

In a similar vein, multilingual networks can help promote democratic habits among non-English-speakers. Again, last spring's immigration marches present a case in point. Spanish-language media networks made the organization and coordination of those demonstrations possible, turning workers into social actors willing to unite with others around common economic and social interests. These acts of collaboration depended on the existence of multilingual institutions, and they are precisely the forms of concerted action that make for a better citizenry. Rather than serving as crutches, multilingual resources enabled an engagement with the public sphere that otherwise would have been difficult to secure, given the inscrutability of an English-only world to a non-English-speaker.

But bilingualism is not just a boon for the non-English-speaking immigrant. It also advantages the bilingual individual herself, as well as society at large, particularly in the context of the globalized workplace. Indeed, bilingual capacity helps companies access foreign markets, and those with language skills are in demand. Because of the globalization of markets and the explosion of immigration from Latin America and Asia, many employers in large cities and on the coasts have increasingly come to value bilingualism in their employees. Yet even as human resource journals document—and even celebrate—this trend, many employers also continue to adopt English-only rules, often to protect the interests of monolingual English speakers, who report feeling harassed or isolated

when their co-workers speak languages other than English. Such language restrictions ultimately interfere with important forms of social bonding in the workplace. They make it more difficult for bilingual employees to communicate with and thus integrate non-English-speaking workers, and they constrain the terms on which bilingual employees develop relationships with fellow workers. Given that most English-only rules appear in the consumer-services sector, the rules also distance important public spaces from the communities in which they are located. And, perhaps most important, English-only rules insulate customers and workers from demographic changes in their environment—changes to which people must learn to adapt to ensure long-term peaceful co-existence in a society of immigration.

The Need for Bilingual Bridges

It is important to recognize the distinction between a multilingual society in which different groups speak different languages and one in which multiple people are bilingual, a distinction often lost on advocates of the assimilation-or-bust approach. Bilinguals possess a crucial capacity to be interlocutors with and organizers of non-English-speaking individuals and are an important resource in a society of immigrants. As Justice Anthony Kennedy recognized in *Hernandez v. New York*, a Supreme Court case involving bilingual jurors, “[l]anguage permits an individual to express both personal identity and membership in a community . . . Bilinguals, in a sense, inhabit two communities, and serve to bring them closer.”

As we face a future of continued immigration from non-English-speaking nations, bilingual individuals will become increasingly important to the processes of immigrant integration. Bilinguals can serve not only as practical guides through the ins and outs of everyday American life but also as bridges between new immigrants and broader American society. Given our demographic realities, the United States should be committed to developing these human resources.

This commitment will require active investment in the development of the country’s bilingual capacities. And that inevitably brings us, at last, to the hot-button issue of bilingual education. Over the past several years, the debate surrounding bilingual education has revolved around whether English-language-learners (ELLs) learn English more effectively through bilingual education or English-immersion courses. This concern is understandable. The public schools, particularly in areas with many immigrants, are overwhelmed by non-English-speaking students who require English-language ability to perform well on state-mandated standardized tests, let alone graduate. But as educators and policymakers focus single-mindedly on the best way to teach English, they are

squandering a significant opportunity by giving scant consideration to native-language retention. In effect, the English-at-all-costs mentality precludes us from building these bilingual bridges.

Approaching ELLs as potential bridges would not mean pigeonholing them as the bilingual education teachers and government interpreters of tomorrow. Rather, properly valuing their native language capacities would have long-term participatory benefits for both the individual student and society. Those benefits include expanding the individual's social and economic opportunities through the development of multilingual capacities, as well as strengthening the families and communities integral to socialization. Children's loss of their capacity to speak a home language has dramatic implications for family relations, as well as for their ability to socialize in the worlds in which they live and find essential family support. For immigrant children to be truly effective participants in the societies around them, they need to develop the ability to navigate the variety of communities and institutions that comprise their American society. Given that this enhanced socialization is likely to benefit society at large, as well, our educational and social policies should aim to foster it.

Bilinguals can serve not only as guides through the ins and outs of American life, but also as bridges between immigrants and American society.

To do so, we first should reverse, through the political process, referenda such as those passed in Arizona, California, and Massachusetts that prohibit the use of native languages in the instruction of ELLs. Such bans prevent state and local policymakers, in cooperation with parents, from acting on the evidence that properly resourced bilingual-education programs produce the best long-term results, not only with respect to language acquisition, but also with respect to other forms of cognitive development. In fact, education researchers Wayne Thomas and Virginia Collier concluded in a 1997 study that well-designed and long-term bilingual programs best promote the "cognitive and academic development necessary" for academic success in the long run. In a 2003 study, they also found that bilingually schooled students, over time, outperform comparably monolingually schooled students, even though the latter initially perform better when tested in English. They further concluded that native English-speakers educated in two-way bilingual immersion programs equaled or outperformed their monolingually educated peers along all measures. Yet, for ideological reasons, native-language bans preclude any experimentation with bilingual-education methods that could boost student performance.

Second, we need to develop programs that facilitate ELLs' native-language retention without keeping them segregated from the larger student population or damaging their ability to learn English. Perhaps the best way of accomplishing this objective would be to adopt two-way bilingual instruction as an option for all students, following the lead of school districts like Florida's Miami-Dade County. With the assistance of a federal grant, Miami-Dade has implemented a program that includes a curriculum exposing students to two languages in a 60 percent English/40 percent "other-language" format. Such programs not only ensure that the development of bilingualism takes place in the context of "mainstream" settings; they also help develop in the native English-speaking population a capacity and incentive to engage non-English-speaking communities and cultures—an engagement indispensable to mutual understanding in a multiethnic society and a globalized world.

Progress Through Heterogeneity

Rethinking language education—much less the linguistic identity of the United States—won't be easy. Despite the clear benefits of developing multilingual resources, segments of the American population always have resisted linguistic heterogeneity. In the 1890s, for example, the *Nation* recommended that only English-speaking immigrants be admitted to the United States, in order to preserve the country's linguistic commonality. During World War I, the teaching of German was suppressed by many states and localities, on the theory that teaching children languages other than English inculcated them with anti-American values. And there is a long history of punishing kids for speaking Spanish in the schoolyard, particularly in the Southwest.

As with the immigrant who turns to a community of co-ethnics for support, this preservationist impulse among the English-speaking majority sometimes reflects genuine anxieties about a changing environment. The English-only ordinances that have appeared in the last year underscore these fears. Absurd as it is to believe that English-speakers require special protection, these ordinances call for defending the rights of those who speak only English, giving voice to the worry that growing multilingualism could translate into forms of disadvantage for the monolingual English speaker—that job opportunities might hinge on the ability to speak Spanish or that going about one's daily business might be complicated by having to interact with people who do not speak English.

But why not treat this anxiety the way we would handle other shifts that have resulted from the emergence of the information economy and globalization? Instead of retrenching into an old world that cannot be recaptured, we should focus on providing people with the incentives and resources for adaptation,

which in this case would mean giving all Americans the tools to operate in a bilingual world. Ironically, the English-dominant majority's resistance to change and the creation of obstacles to the development of bilingualism ultimately repeat the multiculturalists' chief mistake: resisting the assimilation that demographic change inevitably demands of us.

In the end, we should regard confronting differences as essential to self and mutual understanding. Politics is not just about finding points of commonality and proceeding from them. It is also about challenging one another with our differences. The end result will be a society transformed, but that society will in fact be more coherent for having faced the differences in the population directly rather than having tried to suppress them with rules that posit a uniformity that does not exist.

Controversies over immigrant assimilation put me in mind of my late Cuban grandfather, who came to the United States as an adult in 1965. He embraced his new home, proudly wearing the cowboy hat of his adopted state of Texas and quickly learning sufficient English to run his own medical practice with my grandmother. Like many grandfathers, he spent his free time making aphoristic pronouncements to his grandchildren. Among his advice was his belief that *el que sabe más, vale más*: He who knows more, has more value. It was his way of encouraging me, my sisters, and my cousins to maintain the native Spanish-speaking ability we had been given by our parents and grandparents, even as we grew up English-dominant Americans.

If, as a country, we took to heart my grandfather's insight, we might just diffuse the charged terms of the language debate. We would worry less that linguistic diversity signals immigrants' failure to assimilate and be confident instead in immigrants' strong desire to learn English and improve their lives. But we also would acknowledge the real benefits that bilingualism brings and put it to work uniting our diverse people into a strong America democracy. ■