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Language Votes: Attitudes Toward Foreign Language Policies

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Abstract: *This article reports data from opinion polls on attitudes toward language policy in the American public over the last decade. The data appear to reflect sustained support for the teaching and learning of foreign languages at all levels and suggest that there is stronger grassroots acknowledgment of the value of languages than is reflected in statements issued by professionals engaged in, and organizations devoted to, the teaching and learning of languages. The data provide a foundation on which to advocate for increased support of foreign language learning as a core component of 21st-century education and citizenship.*

Key words: *advocacy, language policy, public opinion*

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Introduction

Among the leading campaign issues on which American voters cast their ballots in the 2008 election were the deteriorating economy, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, income taxes, government spending, and candidate race (CNN, 2008). Although several aspects of foreign language policy were raised tangentially during the 2008 campaign, mainly in connection with immigration, foreign language policy issues were not explicitly raised in the presidential debates, campaign platforms, or political advertising. Then-Senator Barack Obama only mentioned the desirability of learning foreign languages on two occasions, a fact that was further developed only occasionally in the media when passing mention was made of the Senator's knowledge of Indonesian from his residence abroad as a child. Data reported below suggest that voters' attitudes toward foreign language learning and foreign language policies in the United States correlated with voter preferences in the 2008 election and offer some potentially intriguing insights into the attitudes of American citizens toward languages other than English.[1]

Review of Literature

A number of surveys have examined the relationships between attitudes toward policies to make English the official language of the United States and voters' political affiliation or ideology. For example, based on state-level exit poll and other interview data from California and other border states, Citrin, Reingold, Waters, and Green (1990) described the demographic and political backgrounds of supporters of "official English" policies in their analysis of voting patterns for California Proposition 63 in 1986. Proposition 63 created an amendment to the constitution of the State of California requiring the preservation, protection, and strengthening of English as the official language of the state. In their polling, Citrin et al. found that Republicans in California were more likely to favor Proposition 63 than Democrats by a 27-point margin (p. 545); ethnic background also played a significant role, with Asian and Hispanic voters in California more opposed than Democrats in general. Tatalovich (1995) and Frendreis and Tatalovich (1997) found former President Ronald Reagan voters and less educated voters in five states (Alabama, Arizona, California, Colorado, and Florida) to be most in favor of official English, while Ricento and Burnaby (1998) found greater support for official English among Republican and non-Hispanic voters in Texas. Barker and Giles (2004) examined social and demographic predictors of support for English-only policies in the Santa Barbara (CA) area and found that exposure to Hispanic media, combined with high degrees of self-identification with Anglophone American communities, predicted support for English-only policies. The general conclusion from these studies, to the extent that it might be drawn, is that non-Hispanic Republican voters in Alabama, Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, and Texas were more likely to favor English-only policies than were Democrats, Asians, and Hispanics in those states. Robinson, Rivers, and Brecht (2006) used data from the 2000 General Social Survey (GSS; Smith, Marsden, Hout, & Kim, 1972–2012) to gain insight into the American public's opinion on policies concerning foreign languages. Robinson et al. found that respondents' support for "English-only" and bilingual education policies, as well as support for secondary-school students taking foreign language courses, were related to respondents' age, level of education, and ability to speak a foreign language.

The present study was designed to put into perspective a number of sometimes-conflicting research findings about attitudes toward foreign language policy in the United States. Specifically, the study sought to determine if support for these policy issues changed from 2000 through 2008, as well as how these attitudes related to voter preferences in the 2008 presidential election.

Methodology

Data were obtained from two national probability surveys that addressed a variety of issues, including language policy. The first survey, the 2000 GSS, was an in-home 90-minute personal survey of a randomly stratified sample of adults that has been conducted at one- to two-year intervals since 1972 by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago (Smith et al., 1972–2012). The foreign language module of the GSS consisted of seven questions. One item on the GSS foreign language module addressed making English the official language of the United States and was asked in a dichotomous "favor-oppose" format. Six other questions (see Table 1) were configured in a 4-point Likert-scale format, with response options ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4).

The second survey was a national election survey conducted by the Public Opinion Laboratory at the University of North Florida (UNF) in October-November of 2008.[2] The seven items that constituted the foreign language module on the 2000 GSS were repeated in the 2008 UNF national election survey. The UNF survey also included questions on party identification, several questions about attitudes on other issues, and standard questions on age and gender. This was a computer-assisted telephone interview survey using random-digit-dial sampling in which all telephone numbers in the United States had an equal chance of selection. The interview took about 15 minutes to complete, with a national probability sample of 1,008 adult respondents aged 18 and older. In each selected household, one adult person was interviewed, also using random selection procedures.

Data Analysis

Simple percentages were calculated by dividing the number of respondents giving a particular answer by the total number of respondents giving an opinion to that question. The data in both surveys were weighted to be representative of U.S. Census Bureau figures in terms of gender, age, race, region, income, and education. For example, if the proportion of women to men in the sample was 56% to 52% in the U.S. Census, then the responses of women in the sample were weighted by a factor of 0.928 (52%/56%) to be 52% of the sample for all questions.

A simple pro–foreign language scale was created by summing each participant's responses to all seven questions in the 2008 survey. This analysis was performed to see if the answers to the foreign language questions reflected any underlying latent variables. For pro–foreign language items (questions 1, 2, and 6) in Table 1, respondents' ratings were summed. Anti–foreign language items, (questions 3, 4, 5, and 7, noted with ** in Table 1) were phrased in such a way that agreeing with the item indicated an anti–foreign language viewpoint. Thus, for these items, the scale was reversed. On the resulting scale, a score of 7 would occur if the respondent expressed strongly anti–foreign language opinions on each of the six Likert-scale items and was in favor of the official English policy, while a score of 28 would indicate a strong pro–foreign language position with respect to all six Likert items and opposition to the official English question. Cut points to create groups based on the pro–foreign language scale were derived from a factor analysis, establishing quintiles with approximately equal numbers in each group based on how they loaded on the overall scale.

In the analyses of the relationship between language variables and respondents' presidential preferences in the 2008 data set, multiple classification analysis (MCA; Andrews, Morgan, & Sonquist, 1973) was used. The MCA statistically controlled for differences in the respondents' party identification, gender, age, race, education, family income, and attitudes toward other issues. The MCA provided a summary of the strength of these differences in terms of a beta correlation coefficient, which, like other correlations, varied

TABLE 1

Distribution of Responses to Language Policy Attitude Questions, 2000 and 2008

Question	2000				2008			
Response (%)	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Agree	4 Strongly Agree	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Agree	4 Strongly Agree
General Attitudes Toward Language Learning								
1. Children in the United States should learn a second language fluently before they finish high school.	3	22	49	27	6	15	40	40
2. Learning a foreign language is as valuable as learning math and science in school.	5	31	43	21	8	24	36	32
Attitudes Toward English-Only Policies								
3. Do you favor a law making English the official language of the United States, or do you oppose such a law?**	Favor: 78		Oppose: 22		Favor: 72		Oppose: 28	
4. Speaking English as the common national language is what unites all Americans.**	3	21	50	26	6	17	28	39
5. English will be threatened if other languages are frequently used in large immigrant communities in the United States.**	16	51	24	9	22	40	22	16
6. Election ballots should be printed in other languages in areas where lots of people do not speak English.	12	22	49	17	25	27	30	18
Attitudes Toward Bilingual Education								
7. Bilingual education programs should be eliminated in American public schools.**	28	50	16	6	36	41	13	10

Note: Question 3 is yes/no; all others follow the 4-point Likert scale format. See Smith et al. (1972–2012) for further information on the 2000 GSS, and contact the authors for further information on the 2008 UNF survey.

between 0 (no association) and 1.0 (maximum association). Moreover, it accounted for collinear and correlated predictor variables and allowed for the differences between nominal and ordinal categories of the predictor variables to be identified.

Results

Responses to the language policy questions on the 2000 and 2008 surveys are presented in Table 1.

Attitudes Toward Language Learning

Questions 1 and 2 addressed respondents' attitudes toward the importance of language learning. In the 2000 GSS, 76% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that children in the United States should learn a second language fluently before they finish high school. In the 2008 survey, 80% of respondents also expressed agreement with this statement. Similarly, in 2000, 64% of respondents believed that learning a foreign language was as valuable as learning math and science in school. Slightly more respondents (68%) agreed with the same statement in the 2008 survey.[3] Results indicated that respondents' attitudes about the value of foreign language learning were initially strongly positive and became slightly more positive during the period under consideration.

Attitudes Toward English as the Official Language

Questions 3, 4, 5, and 6 addressed respondents' attitudes toward English as the official language of the United States. In the 2000 GSS, 78% of respondents agreed that English should be the official language, compared with 72% in 2008. On the 2000 GSS, 76% agreed that English unites Americans, while 67% agreed with that statement in 2008. Results to these two questions suggest slight increases in the public's acceptance of languages other than English.

On the other hand, only 33% of respondents in 2000 and 38% of respondents in 2008 supported the notion that other languages threaten English. The most significant change in Table 1 was the 18-point increase in the proportion of respondents who opposed providing ballots in languages other than English, from 34% in 2000 to 52% in 2008. This result stood out in relation to the relative stability for three of the four items about respondents' attitudes toward English as the official language and what appeared to be generally tolerant attitudes toward the use of other languages.[4]

Attitudes Toward Bilingual Education

Question 7 addressed bilingual education. Fewer than 25% of respondents on either survey agreed that bilingual education should be eliminated. When responses to all seven questions were considered together, several patterns in attitudes toward foreign language policy since 2000 were apparent. First, there was little substantial change in public opinion on the three broad policy issues under consideration (attitudes toward the general importance of language learning, English-only policies, bilingual education). Apart from the question addressing the availability of ballots in languages other than English, the number of respondents who expressed agreement or strong agreement with each item varied by only 0–6% from the 2000 survey to the 2008 survey, indicating the overall stability of public opinion. Second, it was striking that all six Likert-scale items showed an increase in the use of the "strongly agree" response option. This may indicate increased polarization of public opinion since 2000, although it could also have resulted from different modes of interview administration (telephone vs. face-to-face) or response presentation in the UNF and GSS data collection methods.

Foreign Language Support and Its Relationship to Presidential Preference

Next, the relationship between the foreign language support scale and respondents' expressed preferences in the presidential

election were examined. The percentage of respondents who expressed a preference for then-Senator Obama is reported for each level of support for foreign languages in Table 2. As noted above, higher scores represented more agreement with the foreign language "open" items (1, 2, and 6) and more disagreement with the "restrictive" items (3, 4, 5, and 7) in Table 1. Twenty-three percent of the respondents who expressed strong anti–foreign language opinions intended to vote for then-Senator Obama; however, more than 92% of the respondents who expressed strong pro–foreign language opinions intended to vote for him, a difference of 69 points.

A step-wise MCA of the data was performed to control for variables such as party identification and age as well as for other political attitude items in the 2008 survey. The MCA constructed, in effect, a multiple regression model that identified the unique contribution of each variable. The MCA models are presented in Figure 1. Adjusting foreign language differences for party identification reduced its correlation with candidate preference from 0.45 to 0.16, but that was still statistically significant and reflected a 25-point difference in the vote for then-Senator Obama between those who were highly pro-foreign language (70%) and those who were highly anti-foreign language (45%). The relation of the pro–foreign language scale to the UNF sample's preference for then-Senator Obama (54%) is shown in Figure 1. After adjusting for party identification, there was little additional predictive power from the age variable, with older voters slightly more likely, all other things being equal, to express a preference for then-Senator Obama. Language attitudes remained a relatively strong predictor of voting preferences, after all of the other variables in the dataset were accounted for.

Discussion

During the eight years under consideration (2000–2008), survey respondents showed relatively consistent and strong support for public policies that favored foreign language education, bilingual education, and tolerance for other languages. Data also showed that a large number of respondents in both surveys made clear distinctions among the issues, voicing support for the overall importance of learning a foreign language while simultaneously affirming the importance of English. Finally, data from the 2008 survey suggested a modest increase in the number of respondents who held strong opinions on the three issues that form the basis of current language policy (attitudes toward general foreign language learning, English-only, and bilingual education).

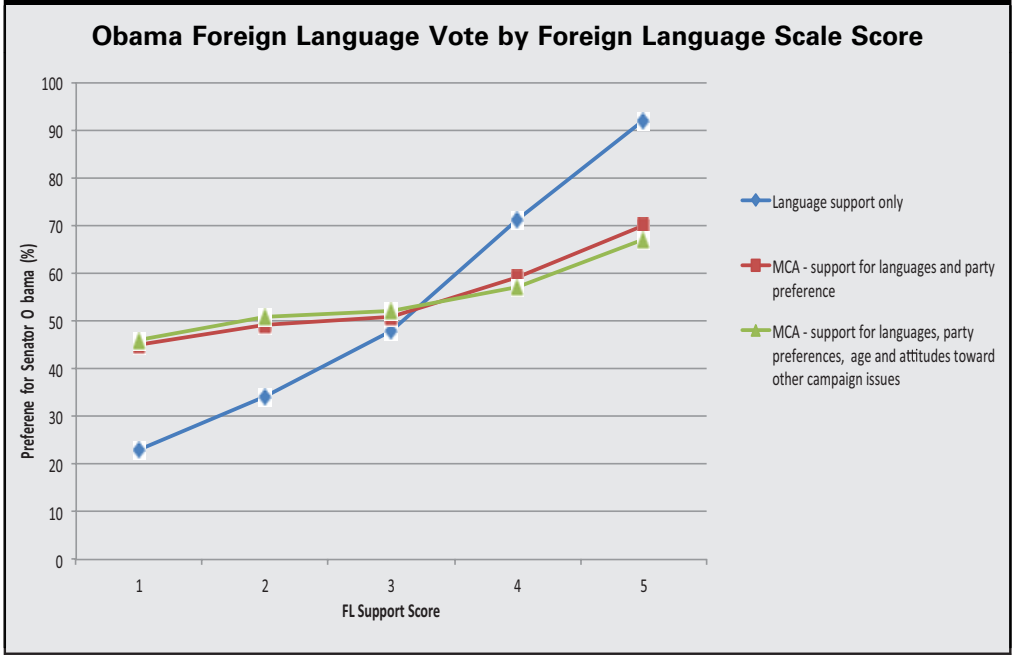
Taken together, the data suggested that there is grassroots support for language learning that may have electoral consequences.

TABLE 2

Then-Senator Obama Vote by Foreign Language (FL) Policy Scale Score

FL Scale Level (*n*)	FL Scale Score range	Percentage expressing preference for then-Senator Obama
Strong Anti-FL (66)	7–11	23
Anti-FL (133)	12–14	34
Ambivalent (192)	15–17	47
Pro-FL (127)	18–21	71
Strongly Pro-FL (142)	22–28	92
Valid Responses (777)	–	55

FIGURE 1



Interestingly, several state-level policies to support foreign language learning have been introduced in recent years. For example, states as different as Washington and New Jersey are seeing an increasing number of parent-demanded after-school language programs. That movement is strong enough that the state of Washington implemented a competency-based credits program for world languages that offers high school credits for demonstrated proficiency in oral and written language regardless of how it was achieved, whether in heritage community schools, by living abroad, in home schooling environments, or in after-school language programs (Aoki, 2012). In addition, the U.S. Department of Defense–funded STARTALK program is enjoying success at the K–12 level across the nation, having reached more than 35,000 students in 48 states in the course of 5 years (personal communication, Catherine Ingold, May 10, 2013). STARTALK funds three- to four-week summer camp programs for K–12 students in a range of languages as well as teacher training workshops for foreign language teachers (National Foreign Language Center, 2013). At the same time, the U.S. Department of Defense–sponsored Language Flagship Program is well on its way to changing the language learning paradigm in higher education. The program provides support to postsecondary institutions for the development of foreign language programs and also provides scholarships for students with the explicit goal of helping students to gain ACTFL Superior level proficiency in all skills. These programs may well mirror the steady public opinion support for foreign languages.

If, in fact, public attitudes toward foreign language learning constitute a grassroots movement, insofar as they reflect deeper, foundational support for the use and learning of languages other than English, then it will be important to take this finding into consideration when advocating for languages. Arguments made by professional associations, national policy makers, and other language advocates include the well-understood and accepted reasons for valuing proficiency in a foreign language: national security, economic competitiveness, development of the individual, strengthening of curricula, the cognitive advantages of bilingualism, the intrinsic value of language

learning, and awareness of other cultures. However, funding and program support at the national, state, and local levels have rarely seemed to take into consideration the broad value the public places on foreign languages.

The sustained level of public support for languages shown in the data reported here may reflect a broadly held view of foreign languages as elemental, representing the essence of the diversity of the 21st century in schools, homes, boardrooms, and the media. In this formulation, foreign languages are a phenomenon that is central to the ethos of Americans who may have grown up in a multilingual, multicultural society and who are accustomed to hearing, using, and expecting to continue to use a language other than English as a part of the fabric of their world. This understanding of the place of language in our society reflects the reality of the "new linguistic dispensation" (Aronin & Singleton, 2008)—a worldwide multilingualism and plurilinguism, where most of the residents of countries in the non-English-speaking world speak multiple languages as the natural order of things. This is a very different position for language advocates, accustomed to the ongoing challenge of justifying both the additive value of language and the need to integrate it, rhetorically at least, into current educational, national security, or economic policy. Thus, it may be possible to adopt a new rhetoric about the learning of foreign languages that includes the traditional instrumental, integrative arguments but also recognizes more tolerant attitudes toward the use of languages other than English as well as more widespread and sustained support for language learning across large segments of the population in the United States.

To be more effective, then, advocacy on behalf of language learning in this country may choose to proceed from this stronger and seemingly more broadly acknowledged point of departure. First and foremost, support for language learning is built through the excellence of our programs, as motivated learners will communicate that excitement to what may be a more receptive parental audience than in previous generations. In addition to making connections to state and local elected officials and within their communities, language advocates can, and should, build bridges to members of the burgeoning language industry by partnering with the companies and individuals whose professional work is centered on translation; interpreting, advising, and assisting companies on how to adapt products, services, and marketing approaches to environments where languages and cultures other than English are prevalent (globalization, localization, and transcreation); language teaching and training; materials and test development; language software engineering; and a range of other fields of activity.[5] As noted in U.S. Senate testimony in 2011, the language industry comprises some 6,000 small businesses in the United States, employing more than 200,000 Americans (*Language drives economic growth, creates jobs, and fosters competitiveness for U.S. businesses*, 2011, n. p.). In practical terms, this means that many school districts will find within the local area one or more businesses in which deep knowledge of language (Kelly & Stewart, 2011; *Language drives economic growth, creates jobs, and fosters competitiveness for U.S. businesses*, 2011; Rivers, 2011) and associated cultures are both required and valued. The National Council for Languages and International Studies and the Globalization and Localization Association are working actively to link the language industry and its customers to foreign language educators at the local, state, and national levels. Establishing these links will support growing dialogue about the requirements that the language industry has for language talent, but more important, it gives advocates at all levels connections to validators, who can in turn testify to the importance of helping students to develop high levels of language proficiency in K–16 educational institutions. Only by engaging the public, by engaging industry, and by

raising awareness among policy makers about the strong and continuous levels of support for foreign language in the general public can the foreign language community and its advocates change the perception among policy makers of language as an adjunct to, rather than a central subject of, our educational system.

Notes

1. Data for the 2012 election were not available at the time this article was written.
2. The UNF survey was commissioned for this research project. Contact the authors for further information about the survey.
3. Although it asked different questions, the 2000 GSS in some ways served to update Eddy's (1980) initial detailed national survey of American's foreign language policy attitudes. Eddy reported that 47% of adults surveyed in 1979 thought learning a foreign language should be required in high schools, 90% thought language courses should at least be offered in high schools, and about 75% thought they should be offered in grammar schools (p. 59). That contrasts with the 80% in 2008 and 76% in the 2000 GSS in Table 1 who agreed that high school students "should learn a second language fluently"; perhaps the higher support figures resulted because the word *required* was not used.
4. This change may have been influenced by public debates on immigration, but it is unclear from data why this particular increase in opposition to making ballots available in languages other than English occurred.
5. See "What is Localization?" (Globalization and Localization Association, 2013) for examples.

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