

The Politics of Bilingualism in the United States: A New Perspective on the Immigration Debate

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So much of the rhetoric concerning immigrants today is not actually new. Once one takes a more expansive view of immigration to the United States, one begins to realize that immigrant stereotypes cross boundaries of race, ethnicity, and religion. But how can this be? The answer may lie in perhaps the most obvious yet somehow overlooked parallel between various immigrant groups. Many individuals in the past have arrived to the U.S. speaking very little to no English and subsequently do not give their native languages. The principal source of anti-immigrant sentiment might thus be rooted in language. Unfortunately, while there are plenty of separate studies of immigration and of bilingualism, there is a clear lack of scholarship that investigates the possible link between the two. This paper, while not highly rigorous, attempts to start filling in that gap. It will be shown that there exists a negative correlation between American attitudes towards bilingualism and immigration levels, and that this correlation boils down to three ranges of the foreign-born share of the U.S. population. It will also be shown that race and naturalization status are not confounding variables.

Introduction

It is an understatement to suggest that the 2016 U.S. presidential election was among the most fraught in recent history. It was clear from the moment that the eventual president announced his candidacy that immigration would be on the forefront. Indeed, immigration—or rather, the fear of it—might have very well determined the outcome of the election. President Trump, as both candidate and Commander-in-Chief, has successfully capitalized on what appears to be a growing anti-immigrant sentiment among the American public.

But what precisely is the root cause of this contemporary negative attitude? President Trump's hyperbole concerning Muslims and his administration's subsequent actions point to a potential religious aversion. But that would not explain the vitriol directed towards Hispanics and Latinos, the majority of whom are Catholic. One might be tempted then to identify ethnicity and race as the latent motivations. However, this line of reasoning, too, crumbles upon taking a more expansive view of immigration to the United States. While it is true that current immigrants are by far from Latin America, Africa, and Asia [1], that has not always been the case. For the majority of its existence, the U.S. received European immigrants [2], [3]. Yet this white and predominantly Christian group of people was also subjected to the same disdain that in the present day is associated with Muslims and Latinos [2], [4]. Catholics were discriminated against because they were the "wrong" kind of Christian (i.e., not Protestant) [5]. Benjamin Franklin labeled "Spaniards, Italians, French, Russians and Swedes" as "swarthy [in] Complexion" [6]. Italians, Irishmen, and even Poles were not considered to be white at one point in time [2], [7]. And Germans, whom today are considered the gold standard in efficiency and in strong work ethic, were considered lazy during the colonial era [4]. How can so many distinct cultures have at one point or another been branded with identical stereotypes? This would suggest that it is not something inherent to each individual immigrant group, but rather

something inherent to immigrants as a collective whole. Perhaps the most obvious yet somehow overlooked parallel between immigrants throughout the U.S.'s history—that many arrive speaking very little to no English and subsequently do not give up their mother tongues—might be the principal source of anti-immigrant sentiment. In other words, anti-immigrant attitudes could be rooted in language.

This paper will investigate the existence of a negative correlation between Americans' views of bilingualism and immigration levels over time; because this endeavor is a study and not an experiment, we will not be able to suggest a direction of causality. An opinion model predicated upon various official and personal documents, scientific studies, and poll results will be constructed and then compared against publicly available immigration data culled from government sources, primarily the U.S. Census Bureau. This undertaking should not be regarded as a rigorous longitudinal study; rather, it is meant to be a cursory review of current research compiled in a new manner and to serve as a possible stepping stone for future scholarship.

What we will be able to glean, if only in a preliminary way, from the methodology described above is that there is an inverse relationship between Americans' opinions of bilingualism and immigration rates over time. We will also be able to show that this negative correlation holds even when we account for potential confounding variables like race and naturalization status. It is important to remember that language—and by extension, bilingualism—cannot be studied in full isolation; our attitudes towards language and bilingualism are intertwined with our feelings regarding race, class, immigration in general, and other factors. But to make an argument about this complicated entanglement is not the purpose of this paper. Rather, we are interested in what different conclusions we might be able to draw upon determining how our views of bilingualism, disentangled as best as we can from some of the previously mentioned factors, have historically tracked with immigration levels.

Official Views of Bilingualism

There appears to be a sort of cyclical tendency in the way bilingualism has been historically viewed by the U.S. government and by American intellectuals. In the colonial era, the government did not mind the existence of bilingualism. Bilingualism was not actively promoted per se, but nonetheless it was not discouraged. In fact, the Continental Congress published its documents in English, French, and German. When John Adams proposed that English be made the official language of the United States, the other Founding Fathers demurred, suggesting that such an imposition would violate the rights of the individual. To this day, the U.S. does not have an official language; rather, English remains its de facto one. [2]

This sort of historical background is what we will use to contextualize what is referred to throughout this paper as our model of the U.S.'s official opinion of bilingualism. We will depict said opinion model as well as the eventual public and integrated societal ones as timelines. (See Figure 1.) Each timeline extends from the year 1800 until the present day in anticipation of the availability of immigration data; i.e., accurate immigration data is virtually nonexistent for the colonial era. Every decade will have a fill color, with red indicating negative views of bilingualism during a particular decade; yellow, neutral views; and green, positive views. If no data can be found for a particular decade, then said decade will remain colored white.

The official attitude towards bilingualism began to sour during the 19th century. (See Figure 2.) The 1800s saw the rise of nationalism and the conception of the nation-state, in which a country is not merely defined by territorial boundaries, but also by cultural and ethnic ones. The Prussian philosopher and linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt popularized the view that a defining characteristic of a nation-state was the existence of a single language spoken by that state's inhabitants. According to Humboldt, the "spirit of a nation" was encapsulated by its language [8]. When these ideas made their way to the United States, bilingualism among the lower classes began to be seen as evidence of a refusal to assimilate into society. Meanwhile, knowledge of multiple languages was still expected of members of the upper classes.

Figure 2. The U.S. government viewed bilingualism in a negative light during the 19th century.

But the upper classes' penchant for multilingualism waned in the early 20th century as the government became more strongly opposed to it. (See Figure 3.) Theodore Roosevelt was quoted in 1907 as saying that "[w]e have room for but one language in this country, and that is the English language" [7]. The U.S. sought to "Americanize" incoming immigrants like never before, and this entailed promoting "English only" [2]. As put by Ellwood P.

Cubberley, then-dean of Stanford University's School of Education, the first step in "break[ing] up immigrant groups ... to assimilate ... these people as part of our American race" was to make them give up their non-English native languages [2].

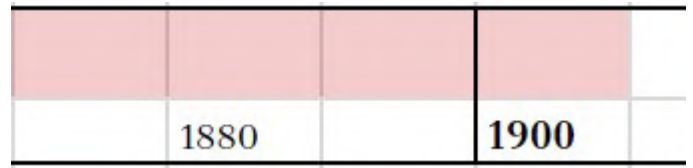


Figure 3. The first decade of the 20th century also saw the elite harbor negative opinions about bilingualism

World Wars I and II succeeded in embedding the belief into American society that even learning a foreign language was unpatriotic [2], [4], [7]. Nebraska banned the public use of languages other than English in 1919, and in 1923, Illinois declared that its official language was "American," though this was changed to English in 1969 [4]. A similar proposal barely failed in Congress in 1923 as well [9]. Figure 4 illustrates this continuing negative sentiment regarding bilingualism. Concurrently, a theory called linguistic relativity, also known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis or Whorfianism, was gaining credence within the academic world. Depending on how strictly this "hypothesis" was interpreted, it entailed that language either shapes or quite literally determines how one interacts with the world [10]. In other words, people who speak different languages experience the world differently from each other. This supposedly meant that one's intelligence was in part influenced by the language which one spoke; i.e., intelligence was inherently constrained by the "simplicity" of one's language. If a language could not express a certain idea, then how could an individual who only knew that language even

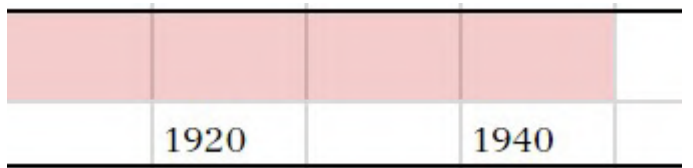


Figure 4. The U.S. government's negative attitudes towards bilingualism continued into the 1940s

understand, let alone devise, such a thought in the first place? Such notions meant that individuals could now claim superiority on the basis of language. Linguistic relativity and related theories

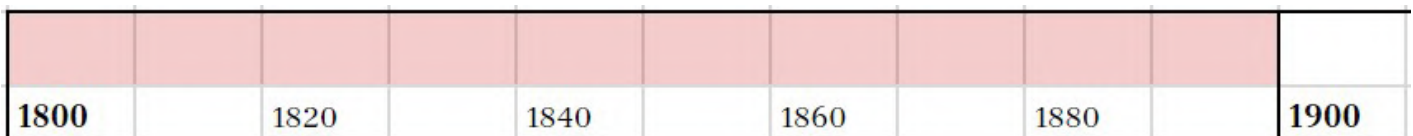
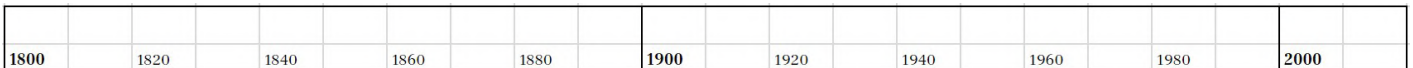


Figure 1. An empty timeline that will serve as the basis for the official opinion model

Figure 2. The U.S. government viewed bilingualism in a negative light during the 19th century

undoubtedly prejudiced early psychological research into bilingualism. Academics even claimed that bilingualism was a cause of mental retardation, arguing that the amount of brain “capacity” required to store two distinct languages systems meant less space for other knowledge and abilities. Studies purported to show that bilingual children were less intelligent than monolingual children [11], [12]. These results only compounded government officials’ convictions that it was in the U.S.’s best interests to suppress bilingualism, a sentiment only heightened by the Second Red Scare of the late 1940s and early 1950s. (Yes, even the specter of Communism manages to rear its head in this narrative.) In this context, bilingualism was framed as a possible national security threat. For example, a federal statute passed during this time not only delineated the trial and deportation procedures for illegal aliens and Communist “subversives,” but also amended the Nationality Act of 1940 to include English literacy as a requirement for naturalization

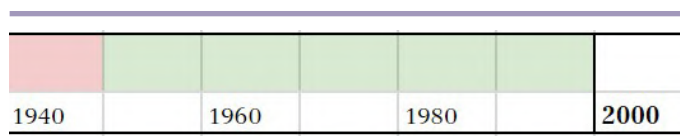


Figure 5. The net effect of the Cold War was positive official opinion of bilingualism for the rest of the 20th century

[13].

The latter half of the 20th century, however, saw a reversal in attitudes regarding bilingualism. (See Figure 5.) The U.S. government’s position on bilingualism evolved into a more favorable one as the country disavowed McCarthyism in the mid-1950s and searched for ways to beat the Soviet Union in the Space Race of the 1960s [14]. The fields of neuropsychology and neurolinguistics came into being, and researchers in these domains began to report that bilingualism came with a slew of benefits, including better executive function control and a delay in the onset of dementia [12], [15].

But once again the politics of bilingualism have been upended by recent events. Even though the number of Spanish speakers in America is decreasing due to intergenerational shift in language use among Hispanics—a phenomenon that occurs within any immigrant population [16]—there have been renewed calls for making English the official language of the U.S. [17]. New neuropsychological and neurolinguistic research suggests that previous reports of the benefits of bilingualism were overblown [12], [15]. And, in a modern-day though heavily diluted iteration of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, languages are now being “scientifically” categorized as “pleasant” or “ugly” [18]. As things stand now, the U.S. government and American intellectuals once more have negative

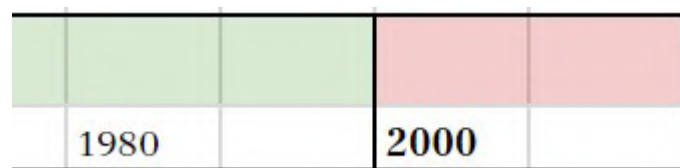


Figure 5. The final version of the official opinion model ends with the negative views of the last decade

views of bilingualism. (See Figure 6.)

Public Opinion of Bilingualism

While it is necessary that our model of the U.S.’s attitudes towards bilingualism over time be grounded in sufficient historical context, it would not be complete without insight into the opinions of the American public. Unfortunately, there is very little data appertaining to public attitudes towards bilingualism, so our model will only comprise the decades from the 1980s onwards.

To get a sense of the views of the general American public, we will first look at seven applicable polls conducted by the Pew Research Center. These polls, conducted somewhat infrequently beginning in April 1997, feature survey questions such as the ones listed below [19].

- Do immigrants have to speak English to say they are part of American society?
- How often do you personally come in contact with immigrants who speak little or no English—often, sometimes, rarely, never?
- Agree or disagree: It bothers me when I come in contact with immigrants who speak little or no English.
- Do most recent immigrants learn English within a reasonable amount of time?

We can amalgamate the responses to these various questions to formulate the public opinion model shown in Figure 7. The polling data suggests that public attitudes towards bilingualism were positive in the 1990s before declining to their nadir in the mid-2000s. Public sentiment improved around 2010 before again declining in 2015—when now-President Trump declared his candidacy, not so

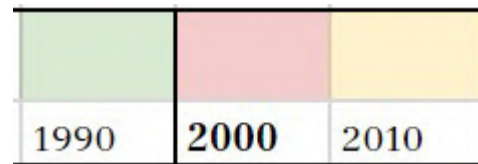


Figure 7. Public opinion of bilingualism fell from the 1990s to the 2000s. There is an overall neutral sentiment in the 2010s due to a considerable amount of fluctuation from positive to negative views

coincidentally—but is now back on the rise. (See Appendix.)

To strengthen our general public opinion model, we can delve into Americans’ Internet searches. Using Google Trends, we can explore potential correlations between bilingualism and immigration by using search terms as surrogates for the public’s beliefs. Figures 8 and 9 are screenshots of the comparison between monthly searches of “English only” and “bilingualism” and between “bilingualism,” “immigration good,” and “immigration bad,” respectively. These line graphs can both be divided into two time periods as indicated by the black dotted lines. From 2004 to 2011, there is a strong correlation between searches for “English only” and “bilingualism” and a weak correlation between searches for “bilingualism” and “immigration bad.” (See Figures 8 and 9, left of the dotted line.) We can surmise this as representing a period of time in which Americans had negative opinions of bilingualism. On the other hand, there has been no correlation between searches for “English only” and “bilingualism” since 2011, and there is instead a strong correlation between searches for “bilingualism” and “immigration good.” (See Figures 8 and 9, right of the dotted line.) This indicates that the public’s perceptions of bilingualism have been more favorable since the start of the current decade. Consolidating the results of Google Trends analysis does not

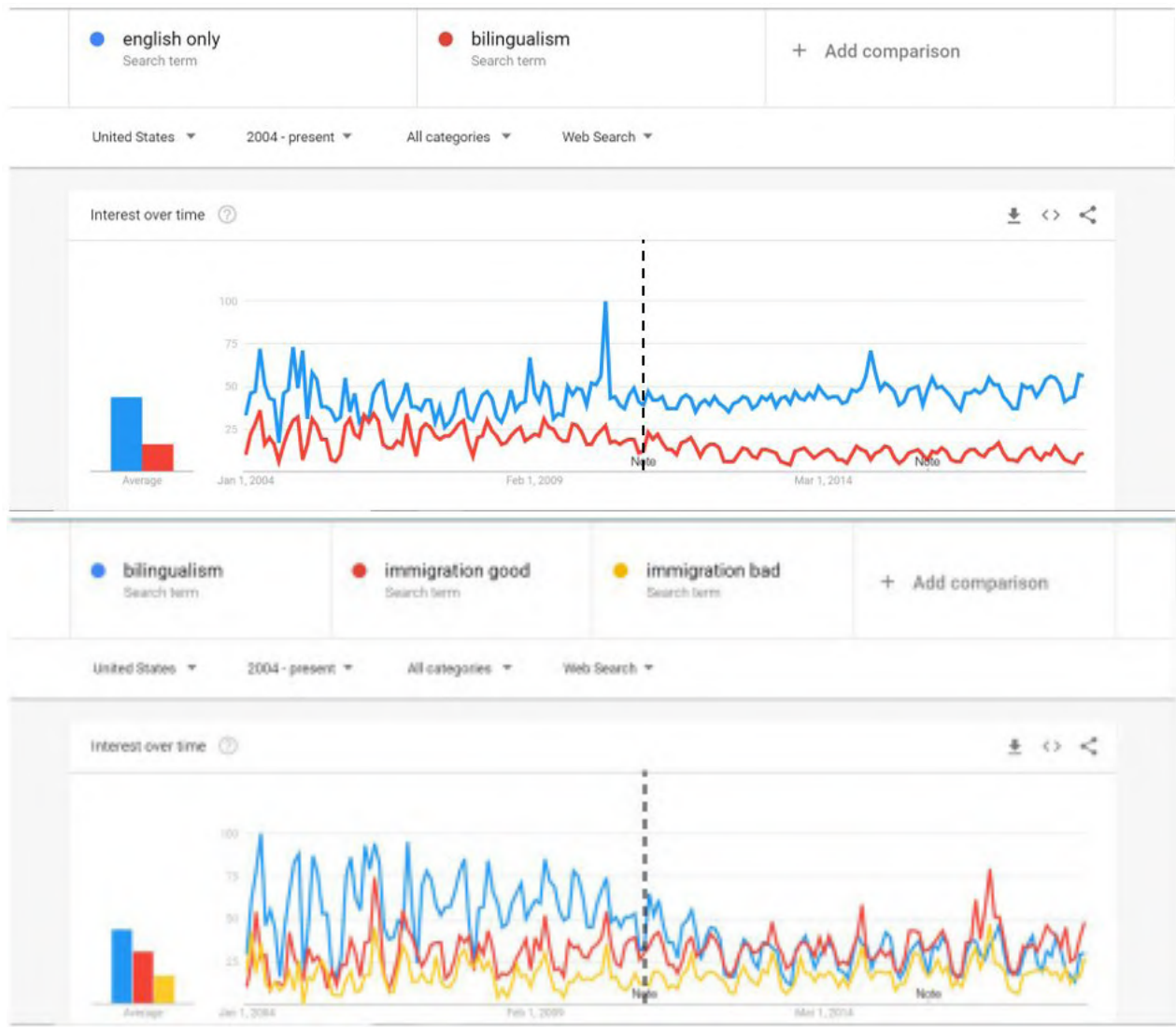


Figure 8. Comparison of monthly searches for "English only" versus "bilingualism" in the United States from January 2004 until the present day [20]

Figure 8. Comparison of monthly searches for "English only," "immigration good," and "immigration bad" in the United States from January 2004 until the present day [21]

alter our original public opinion model. (See Figure 10.) We can broaden our public opinion model by considering the views of American bilinguals themselves. We will take the rate of intergenerational shift in language use among immigrants and their progeny as indicative of bilinguals' perception of their own bilingualism. Records from the 19th and 20th centuries led to the formulation of the three-generation model of intergenerational language shift; i.e., it was found that in the United States, knowledge of a foreign language is lost in about three generations [3]. While

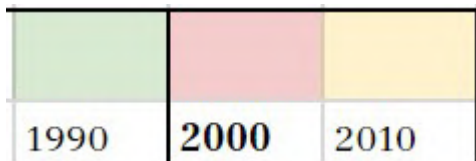


Figure 10. The public opinion model remains unaltered after adding Google Trends data

this is true in the present day [3], [16], [22], [23], it might not have always been the case. The three-generation model comes out of a convergence of existing data and is not an actual rigid rate. If society suddenly views bilingualism in a more negative light, then immigrants will encourage their children to speak English more often, resulting in knowledge of the native language dissipating in fewer generations.

Indeed, the three-generation model does not hold perfectly from the 1980s until about the start of the 2000s, but for the opposite reason. During these two decades, intergenerational language shift took longer than three generations, specifically amongst Hispanic- and Latino-Americans. That this occurred in the Hispanic population should be unsurprising, as Central and South Americans have constituted the largest group of immigrants since the 1980s [1]. In any case, this suggests that American bilinguals, and therefore the greater public, had positive attitudes towards bilingualism during the 1980s and 1990s. Incorporating this information into our public opinion model gives us the final iteration depicted in Figure 11.



Figure 11. The finished public opinion model begins with the public's positive views of bilingualism in the 1980s

Comparison of Bilingualism Views and Immigration Levels

Before we can compare historical views of bilingualism against immigration data, we must integrate our official and public opinion models into a single societal model. (See Figures 12, 13, and 14, respectively.) It is apparent from seeing the official and public opinion timelines side-by-side that public opinion tends to follow the beliefs of the elite. This results in our integrated societal model appearing exactly the same as the model of the official view of bilingualism. Figure 14. The societal model is the result of combining the official and public opinion models.

We will use the percentage of the total U.S. population that is foreign-born to represent what we interchangeably refer to as immigration levels or rates. We can overlay a line graph of this data with the corresponding portion of our societal model of bilingualism attitudes over time. (See Figure 15.) What we find is that there is indeed—and perhaps unsurprisingly—an inverse relationship (i.e., negative correlation) between views of bilingualism and immigration rates over time.

In fact, there is a far more definitive association that can be established from comparing our societal model against immigration levels. When the share of the total U.S. population that is foreign-born falls below 7.5 percent, Americans as a whole have a positive attitude towards bilingualism. When the foreign-born share rises above 10 percent, society has a negative outlook of bilingualism. The in-between range of 7.5 to 10 percent is ambiguous; the 1940s saw negative views of bilingualism although the proportion of the population that was foreign-born was less than 10 percent, and the 1990s saw positive opinion when said proportion was more than 7.5 percent.

With observational studies, we always run the risk of there being confounding variables. In other words, bilingualism and immigration may only seem to be correlated because there is some third factor that affects both of them in the same direction. One strong assumption that was made at the beginning of this paper

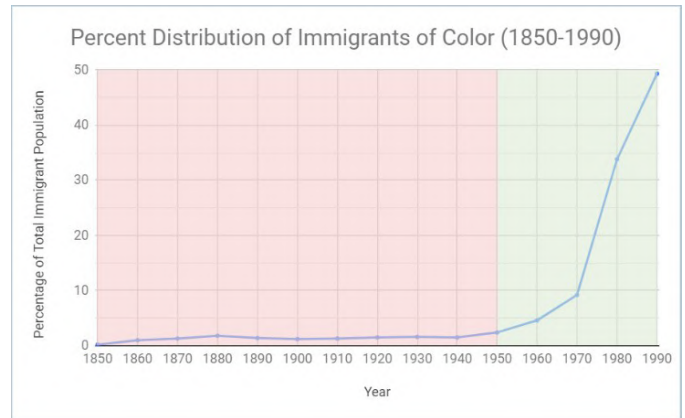
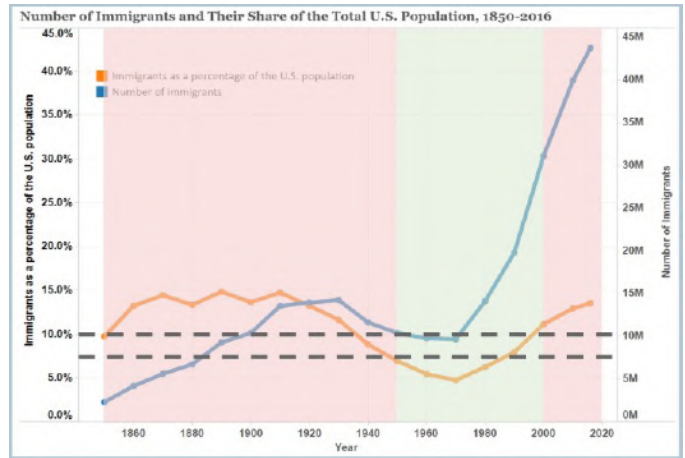


Figure 15. A line graph illustrating the foreign-born share of the U.S. population from 1850 until 2016 with corresponding bilingualism model colors overlaid by the author of this paper [24]

Figure 16. A line graph created by the author depicting the non-white share of immigrants from 1850 until 1990 and overlaid with corresponding bilingualism model colors [25]

involved the role of race in attitudes towards immigrants. We claimed that because the same stereotypes have been historically applied to many different racial and ethnic groups, race could not explain Americans' changing opinions about immigrants. Immigration data validates our reasoning. Figure 16 illustrates how the proportion of non-white immigrants has been increasing dramatically since

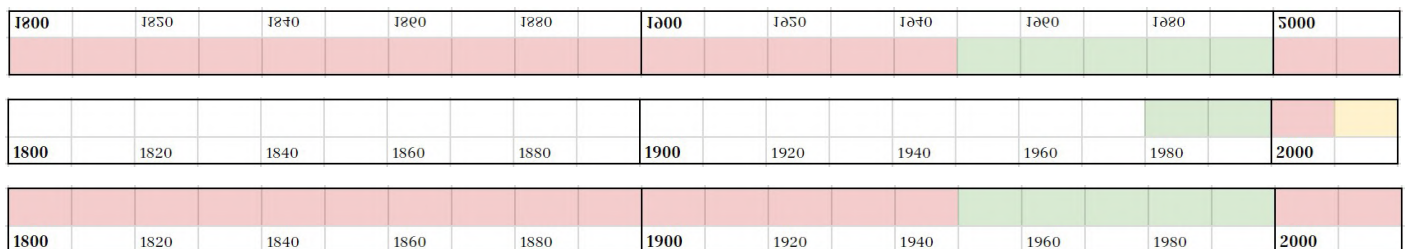


Figure 12. The completed official opinion model

Figure 13. The completed public opinion model

Figure 14. The societal model is the result of combining the official and public opinion models

the mid-20th century. If race were a confounding variable, then we would expect to see negative views of bilingualism during this time period and positive views otherwise. However, the very opposite phenomenon occurs. Therefore, our assumption that race is not a factor holds.

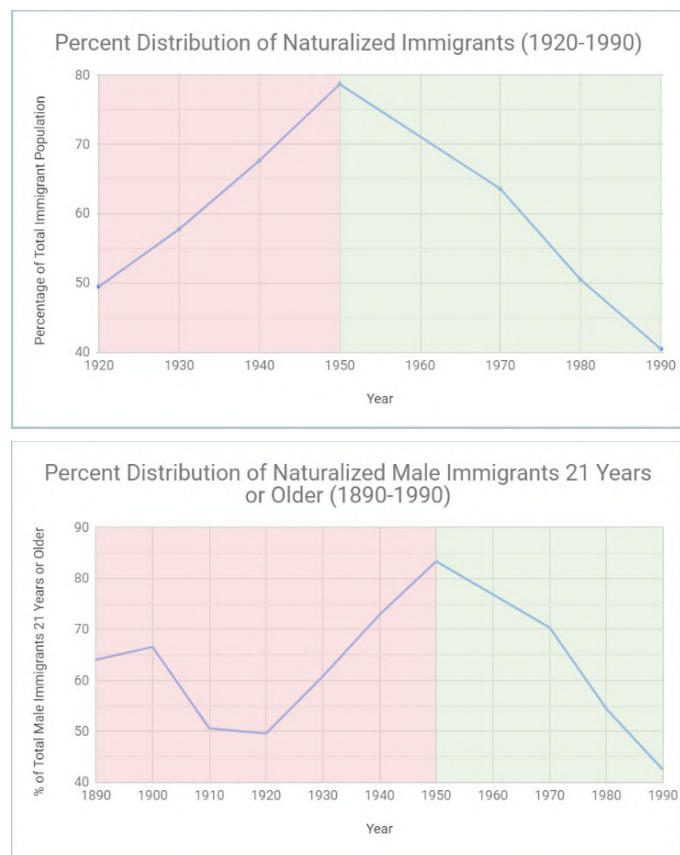


Figure 17. A line graph created by the author illustrating the naturalized share of immigrants from 1920 until 1990 and overlaid with corresponding bilingualism model colors [26]

Figure V. A line graph created by the author illustrating depicting the naturalized share of male immigrants 21 years or older from 1890 until 1990 and overlaid with corresponding bilingualism model colors [26]

Of course, this is not to say that language cannot have become racialized in the past few decades or that it was never racialized in the first place. As stated in the introduction of this paper, language and bilingualism cannot be studied in full isolation. But again, when we try to disentangle race from bilingualism as much as possible given our methodology, we find that race in general has no effect.

Another confounding variable might be naturalization status, the logic being that a decrease in the share of immigrants who are naturalized would be taken as a sign of diminishing assimilation, thus causing native-born Americans to turn against the immigrant population as a whole. If this were the case, then we would expect to see negative attitudes towards bilingualism when the proportion of naturalized immigrants falls. As with race, we find no such relationship. (See Figure 17.) Even when we compare views of bilingualism against the proportion of naturalized male immigrants

21 years or older—an immigrant subgroup for which there is data over a longer period of time—there still appears to be no correlation. (See Figure 18.) Therefore, we can conclude that naturalization status is also not a confounding variable.

In sum, comparing our integrated societal model of bilingualism attitudes over time against immigration data demonstrates that 1) there are positive views of bilingualism when the share of population that is foreign-born falls below 7.5 percent, 2) opinions of bilingualism are negative when said share of the population rises above 10 percent, and 3) race and naturalization status are not confounding variables.

Further Study

Academic and government research may be replete with separate studies of immigration and of bilingualism, but there is a clear lack of scholarship that investigates the possible link between the two in shaping our views on what it means to be an American. If an opinion model as imprecise as the one formulated in this paper still allows for some unequivocal conclusions to be drawn about the negative correlation between attitudes towards bilingualism and immigration levels, then only imagine what could be discovered with more meticulously created and exhaustive models. An obvious extension of this paper would hence be to conduct more rigorous studies using the same approach detailed here. Such studies would ideally use more data sets than does the model constructed in this paper, particularly when it comes to the public opinion component. (As an aside, it is hoped that public opinion polls concerning bilingualism will be conducted with greater frequency in the future, as this would greatly assist with such lines of inquiry.)

There are other avenues for further research that might be instigated by the results of this paper. It is crucial that confounding variables continue to be scrutinized and eliminated in order for the inverse relationship between bilingualism views and immigration rates to be made more concrete. Specifically, social class needs to be examined as a possible factor at play. A shared characteristic among immigrants, aside from speaking a foreign language, is social class; historically, most individuals who have immigrated to the United States have been poor. But poverty has always afflicted a sizable portion of Americans, and arguably the typical attitude towards poor native-born Americans is less hateful than towards poor immigrants. However, the potential influence of social class should not be discounted; what the analysis in this paper might have actually shown was not a negative correlation between opinions of bilingualism and immigration levels, but rather between social class and immigration levels, with bilingualism serving as a proxy for social class. Since the U.S. government does not directly record the social class of immigrants, it is suggested that educational attainment or some other similar attribute be used as an analog to social class.

Conclusion

Ultimately, we are nearing a fundamental crossroads in our nation's history. With an ever-growing population of Latinos [1] and of immigrants in general [24], it is imperative to determine whether the current heightened levels of contempt and hostility are historical anomalies or simply parts of a larger pattern. The fact that even this paper's relatively lax analysis revealed a bona fide inverse relationship between our attitudes towards bilingualism and immigration rates over time is telling. We need to conduct more statistically rigorous longitudinal studies in order to cement the notion that the

aforementioned negative correlation does indeed exist. Furthermore, potential confounding variables, namely social class, ought to be explored.

Margaret Thatcher perhaps best summarized the main difference between the United States and other Western nations: “Europe was created by history. America was created by philosophy” [27]. One of America’s driving philosophies has been equality—if not equality, then at least the pursuit of it. But right now, there is an increasing number of people in this country that are treated differently, and it may very well be because these individuals sound different. If we could explicitly identify the root cause of our historical ambivalence towards immigrants and foreigners, then perhaps we could finally begin to rectify the actual problem rather than its side effects.

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