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## **Title: Socioeconomic status and Language Policy in the US**

**Description:** Low socioeconomic status is highly correlated to poor English proficiency. But despite this marginalization, policy makers are uninterested in improving language policies. Due to income and other social restrictions, language minorities face bigger challenges with political participation.

### **Key Words:**

Socioeconomic Status (SES); Language Policy; Voting Rights Act; Bilingual Education; English Proficiency; Democracy; Language Minority

### **Key Points:**

- Language Policy is unpopular in Congress and generally neglected
- Low socioeconomic status have a strong correlation to poor English proficiency
- Language Policy transcends the matter of discrimination, it is the technically of maintaining a representative government.
- It is difficult to consider all non-English speakers into the same SES category, because some can afford to pay better education
- Language minorities are not always immigrants but from all low-income classes

### **Issue Brief:**

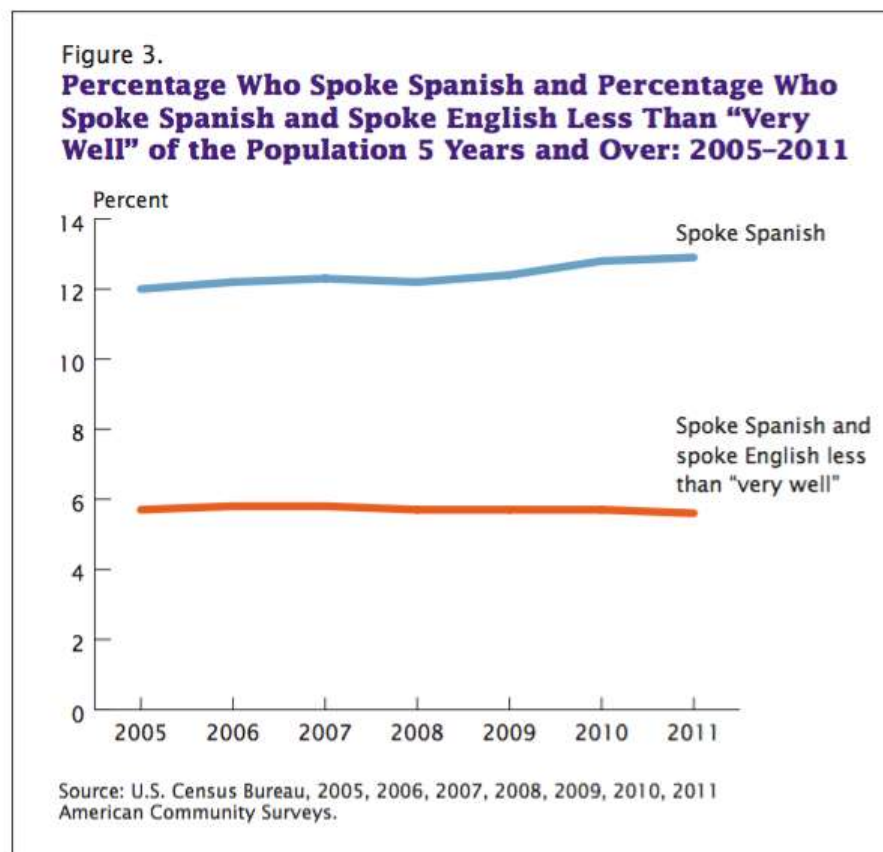
There exist two major social dilemmas at the intersection of America's language policy and socioeconomic status. First is the *glass ceiling dilemma*. Due to lack of sophistication and fluency in English, immigrants are exempt from beneficial opportunities of upward social mobility and political participation; such opportunities are usually reserved for Anglophones with access. Second is the *division dilemma* where wealthier members of the same language or ethnic group are not affected by poor language skills because they are able to afford better language educator. Overall disadvantaged lower SES minorities are LEP (limited language proficiency) due to lack of educational opportunities. Disunity within language minorities generally deters progress in language policies.

The most crucial concept about language policy is that it transcends political and racial issues of social injustice, but addresses a technical matter of abstaining language minorities from political participation due to language barriers.

Language policy is imperative to achieving desegregation but happens to be an undervalued policy in government. The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 and *Lau v. Nicholas Supreme* court decisions are two primary government initiatives that ban language discrimination public schools and to further provide special services to non-native speakers; the form of the special services was left vague. Overall Spanish speakers benefited most from bilingual education given their long-term battle between LULAC (League of United Latin American Citizens) and public school administrators (McClain

and Stewart). Beyond its relevance to anti-discrimination of education based on race and ethnicity, language policy remains unpopular. A recent examination of language-related legislation in the 100th US Congress (in session from January 1987 through October 1988) showed a unanimous vote of 535 members who believed language issues to be unimportant (Egginton 71).

Studies show that children from lower SES generally have poor language proficiencies, let alone fluently bilingual if they are ethnic minorities. The biggest concern for the low SES is that it frequently co-occurs with other conditions that purportedly affect children and individuals, such as low education and immigration status (Bradly). Considering that language policy issues are directly related to the immigrant citizens, we can easily assume that poor immigrants face cross cutting cleavages of poverty and language deficiency. However, we can observe from the Census Bureau chart of 2005-2011 that although the Spanish speaking demographic is increasing, the number of Spanish speakers feeling comfortable with English remains unchanged (Ryan 6). These numbers indicate a polarizing society where more Spanish speakers are becoming more and more marginalized due to language.



We cannot categorize all immigrants to the same SES because some immigrants come from inherent wealth. This is phenomenon where socioeconomic status of

immigrants intersects with language policies. Truth is that language policies are unlikely to be a problem for, let's say, the wealthy Chinese immigrants in comparison to poor illegal Chinese immigrants. The rich are able to afford charter schools and highly trained private language tutors to assist their non-proficient English skills. Since the wealthy are able to exemplify such lifestyle, policy makers may feel divided about the importance of improving language policies. This circumstance specifically shows why language policy is generally disadvantageous for low-income language minorities.

Despite efforts to discourage language discrimination in public schools, major states like California, Arizona and Massachusetts carried out an "English for our Children" initiative in the 90's that was considered as a pushback to bilingual education. The notion was that Hispanic children performed poorly in schools because they were not being fully integrated into all-English classrooms. Middle class citizens generally felt uncomfortable sending their children to public schools that would undermine their child's academic performance by being compared to poor students. Nevertheless, the results were a failure because Hispanic students did not show any signs of improvement following the initiative (Gandara). Only wealthy language minorities who could afford additional education were exempt from this underprivileged demographic.

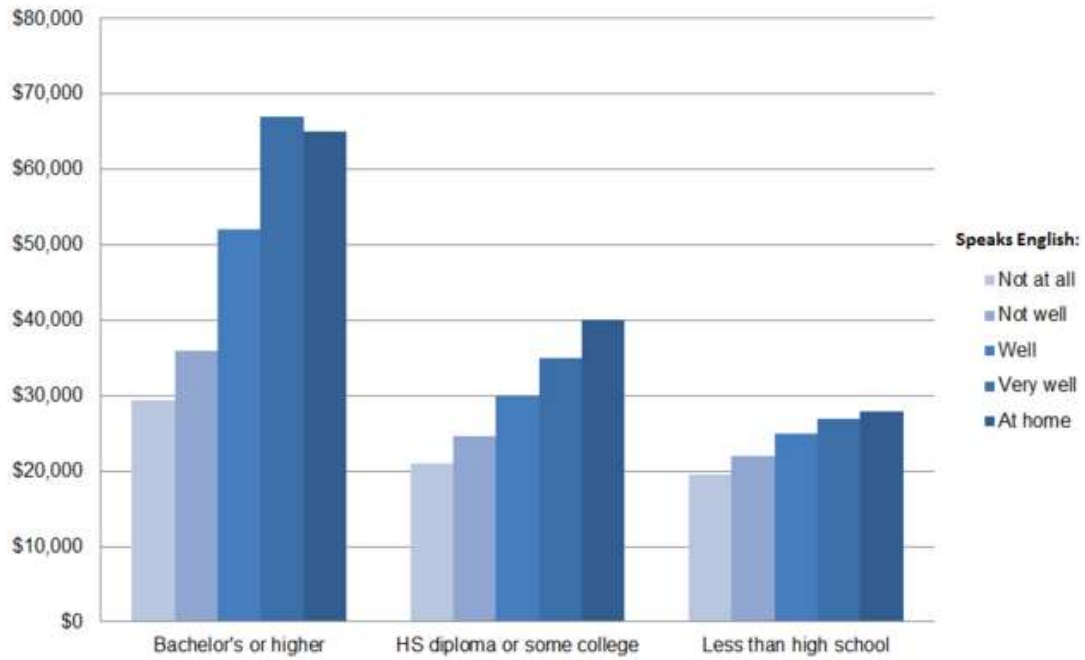
Improvement on language policy concerns maintaining the technicality of America's democratic elections. Due to the low voting rates of "language minorities," congress reauthorized the Voting Rights Act in 1975 to provide language services in voting polls (CQ Reader). As such if language policies are neglected, not only are we restraining the upward social mobility of the low SES of language minorities but also jeopardizing the democratic nature of elections. It is crucial for all citizens to understand the political current and vote accordingly, but when political participation is hindered due to one's language proficiency we must question the technical importance of knowing English and or diversifying language options.

Two thirds of students in ELL programs come from low-income families who are usually second or third generation U.S. citizens, and of these students only 29 percent scored above basic reading levels (NEA). This information is significant because it showed how low income is correlated to poor English skills, which means that one doesn't have to be and immigrants to face these challenges. He or she may be white or black as well.

In conclusion, it is evidential that low SES citizens generally have poor English proficiency skills in comparison to wealthier citizens who can afford privileged education. Language policy derives its significance in its necessity to promote a participatory democracy eliminating the discrimination of language and income.

**Picture:**

**Figure 4. Median Earnings by English Proficiency and Educational Attainment, Ages 25-64**



*Source: Author's analysis of ACS 2012 PUMS; earnings are calculated for those who worked at least 35 hours per week and at least 50 weeks over the previous 12 months*

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