

# **Stability and Change in Americans' Foreign Language Policy Attitudes: 2000-2008**

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## **Introduction**

The last decade has seen unprecedented policy emphasis on the Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs) – whether broadly, as indicated by the regular publication of lists of languages critical to the national interest, such as that of the US Department of Education (2010), or in the particular languages included in the multiple new Federal programs that comprise the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI), such as the National Language Service Corps, STAR-TALK, the Language Flagship, the English for Heritage Language Speakers program, or the NSLI for Youth, to cite several examples. The LCTLs predominate in these lists, reflecting a national level policy emphasis on the LCTLs. This emphasis derives from perceived and actual needs for specific LCTLs required for the common weal – for national security, economic well being, and social justice (Brecht et al., 2007; Brecht & Rivers, 2000). This emphasis, consisting in its entirety of programs promulgated, funded, and directed by the Federal government, stands in contrast to the ongoing perception in our professional fields that Foreign Languages (FLs), and the LCTLs among them, are under increasing and unprecedented stress in the educational system, and that furthermore, that the teaching of LCTLs lacks public support, or is even actively opposed in the broader US society (Wiley, 2007).

Since 2000, public discourse about US foreign language (FL) policy has focused on two significant, distinct and politically separate

issues: 1) promotion of foreign language learning for the national interest, especially since the events of 9/11, and 2) controversies centered around the role of language as an overt indicator of immigrant status. Policy makers and foreign language educators need to know about these attitudes as they attempt to formulate new policy options and recognize what proportions of Americans support or oppose them. These issues are of vital interest to the communities with equities in the teaching and expansion of foreign languages in the United States, including K-16 FL teachers and administrators, language policy researchers, and government officials responsible for FL programming, but especially to the NCOLCTL, given the extensive focus on LCTLs as noted above, and the dependence of many LCTL fields on Federal support. The 2006 National Security Language Initiative combines the efforts of the Departments of State, Education, and Defense in an attempt to improve national FL capacity in the United States. In the realm of national security, the Department of Defense and the components of Intelligence community have indicated immediate needs in a range of languages, such as Arabic, Chinese and Farsi, among other FLs. Policies and programs promulgated for foreign language development since 2001 include programs such as the Language Flagship, the National Language Service Corps, STARTALK, and other elements of the National Security Language Initiative.

The data we present here may inform the assessment of initiatives such as those listed above, or the development of further policies and programs -- in particular as political leaders gauge public receptivity to new initiatives in FL planning. To the extent that language is considered a particular form of human capital (Chiswick & Miller, 1995) or a common public good (Brecht & Rivers, 2000), subject to planning on behalf of the polity deriving benefit from language as a common good, public perception of the role FLs play in the US strongly influences the formulation and execution of new in-

initiatives. Wiley (2007) points out that FL policies in the US policies are contested:

Advocates of English-only policies have dichotomized the issue of U.S. language policy as a zero-sum game, as if there is a contest between English and other languages (Wiley, p253).

Simply put, our data show otherwise – that while related, the two issues are not independent, and that, in fact, public support in the US for FL education is broad.

The General Social Survey (GSS), conducted every two years since the early 1970s by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, is considered the premier monitor of trends in American public opinion and behavior. In 2000 and subsequent surveys, the GSS has included a series of questions on foreign language skills and attitudes towards language policy. These FL data shed light on the dichotomy named by Wiley, and are indicative of national sentiment and generally free of polemic, as the GSS is designed to be policy neutral. This allows us to avoid, to some degree, direct linkages of US FL policy to national security, economic competitiveness, social well-being (Brecht & Rivers, 2000), the more broadly conceptualized “national interest” (Parker, 1961), or the xenophobia cited above by Wiley (*op cit*). In other words, the FL data from the GSS are essentially presented on their own, rather than being framed in terms of the lines of argument that typically encompass FL policy discussion in the US.

At the same time, public opinion data provide only a rough picture of the state of FL and language policy attitudes, often not addressing issues or nuances of concern to FL scholars. Not only are there serious problems in capturing the reasons underlying their answers, these surveys offer only two snapshots rather than the continuous dynamics in opinions taking place between these two readings. Thus, one can only speculate on the factors underlying any changes in opinion. It is further the case that it is not possible with these sample sizes to appreciate how they may be affected by demo-

graphic shifts in the population, particularly as minorities and immigrants migrate or become more prominent in different communities across the country.

At the same time, these two snapshots represent the only generalizable empirical evidence on which to speculate on what appears to be some new trends in the nature of the general public's positions on FL issues. It will be seen in Table 1 that the 2008 responses are within sampling error of the 2000 results for 5 of the 7 questions, supporting the conclusion that the two surveys are comparable across time.

Although asking different questions, that 2000 GSS served to update Eddy's (1980) initial detailed national survey of American's FL policy attitudes. Eddy reported 47% of 1979 survey adults thought learning a foreign language should be required in high schools (and 90% thought language courses should at least be offered in high school and about 75% in grammar schools). That contrasts with the 80% in 2008 (and 76% in the 2000 GSS) in Table 1 below who agreed that high school students "should learn a second language fluently", higher support figures perhaps because the word "required" was not used.

There have been a number of state/local FL surveys, each focused on specific research questions, typically on English Only policies. Based on state-level exit poll and other interview data from California and other border states, Citrin et al. (1990) described the demographic and political backgrounds of supporters of the "official English" policies. Schmid (1992) found some similar correlates among supporters of English-only policies. Tatalovich (1995) found Reagan voters and less educated voters in five states to be most in favor of official English. Ricento (1998) found greater support for official English among Republican and non-Hispanic voters in Texas. Barker and Giles (2002) examined important demographic predictors of support for English-only policies in the Santa Barbara (CA) area. More recently, Palozzi (2006) developed a more comprehensive lan-

guage policy scale (LPAS) based on 12 items, six grounded in multiculturalism and six on assimilationism in order to achieve a more nuanced picture of public opinion on these issues. When applied to a 2002 sample of 300 registered voters (out of 2749 contacted) in Colorado and a 2003 sample of 322 Indiana University students, Palozzi found most of these respondents supported both English-only policies and the public use of other languages as well. His LPAS scale was found to be highly predictive of whether his Colorado voters supported a restrictive language state Amendment, far more predictive than demographic predictors of vote intent. Here neither political party nor ideology was predictive, after the LPAS score was taken into account.

### **Survey Methodology**

The 2008 data come from an October-November national omnibus survey conducted the Public Opinion Research Lab at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville. This was a Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI) survey using Random-Digit-Dial (RDD) sampling, in which all US telephone numbers have an equal chance of selection. The interview took about 15 minutes to complete with this national probability sample of 1008 adult respondents aged 18 and older. In each selected household, one adult person was interviewed at random also using random selection procedures. The 2000 GSS was an in-home 90-minute personal survey that has been conducted at one-to-two year intervals since 1972 by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago.

## The Import of Americans' Attitudes towards FLs for the LCTLs

We begin with an overview of Americans' attitudes towards FL, addressing through quantitative analyses questions:

- 1) Change over time: Have Americans' attitudes towards FL policy become more restrictive during the Bush Administration? We examine this question in Tables 1 and 2, below.

With respect to the LCTLs, the wave of support for FL programming, and the resultant publicity and funding, have been critical to the growth and health of the LCTLs in the past decade. Changes in the level of support – in particular, any perception that support is declining – could be deleterious, especially in an era of severely constrained resources. On the other hand, increased support – even sustained support at prior levels – might serve as an indication of the permanence and public recognition of the importance of LCTLs to the common weal.

- 2) Demographic predictors of support for FL: We examine whether there are demographic predictors, such as age, political affiliation, minority status, or gender, which predict support for FL in the US. These analyses are presented in Tables 3 and 4 below.

The demographic predictors of support for FL contain two fundamental thrusts: the first set of independent variables we include under the rubric of demographics includes political affiliation, gender, and minority status; these have shown to be informative in our previous analyses (Robinson et al., 2006).

The second we test the near universal assumption that the changing demographics of immigrant languages in the US over the past 20 years influences FL policy attitudes, generally in a positive way, as FL speakers become more prevalent and accepted in the society at large, as the language service industry continues its rapid growth (Kelly & Stewart, 2011), and as the business community continues to expand its communications with those markets in the US

that have resulted from the immigration of the past 20 years. Finally, as the children of immigrants enter the workforce and public life, and eventually send their children to school, one might reasonably posit that their familiarity with FLs would tend to increase support for FLs in general, and that this will increase over the next several decades. For the LCTLs, the import of this changing demographic could well be vital and transformative – that is, if FL becomes an expectation in the educational system and in public life. We will return to this question later, in the discussion section.

## Results

As can be seen in Table 1, support for FL in the US remains remarkably stable, with the exception of increased opposition to bilingual ballots. Combining the strongly and less strongly positions in the Table 1 responses, close to or more than 70% agreed in both years that English should be the official US language (Q1), that high school students should become fluent in a foreign language (Q2b), and that FL is of equal educational value as math or science (Q2d); some 75% also agree and that English unites Americans (Q2c). In contrast, less than 25% agreed that bilingual education should be eliminated (Q2a) and 32-36% that immigrant use of FLs posed a threat to English (Q2e). However, the most significant change in Table 1 was the 18-point increase in the proportions opposing ballots in other languages (Q2f), from 34% in 2000 to 52% in 2008. This result stands out in relation to the relative stability or reliability found for the other six items in Table 6 (which provides further evidence of the comparability of the two surveys).

**Table 1:**  
**Percentages for Foreign Language Questions**

1. Do you favor a law making English the official language of the United States, or do you oppose such a law? <i>2000: Favor: 78%; Oppose: 22%</i> <i>2008: Favor: 72%; Oppose: 28%</i>
2. Now please tell us whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with each of these statements
a. Children in the U.S. should learn a second language fluently before they finish high school. <i>2000 Strongly agree: 27%; agree: 49%; disagree: 22%; Strongly disagree: 3%</i> <i>2008 Strongly agree: 40%; agree: 40%; disagree: 15%; Strongly disagree: 6%</i>
b. Bilingual education programs should be eliminated in American public schools  <i>2000: Strongly agree: 6%; agree: 16%; disagree: 50%; strongly disagree: 28%</i> <i>2008: Strongly agree: 10%; agree: 13%; disagree: 41%; strongly disagree: 36%</i>
c. Speaking English as the common national language is what unites all Americans. <i>2000: Strongly agree: 26%; agree: 50%; disagree: 21%; strongly disagree: 3%</i> <i>2008: Strongly agree: 39%; agree: 38%; disagree: 17%; strongly disagree: 6%</i>
d. Learning a foreign language is as valuable as learning math and science in school. <i>2000: Strongly agree: 21%; agree: 43%; disagree: 31%; strongly disagree: 5%</i> <i>2008: Strongly agree: 32 %; agree: 36 %; disagree: 24 %; strongly disagree: 8%</i>
e. English will be threatened if other languages are frequently used in large immigrant communities in the U.S. <i>2000: Strongly agree: .9%; agree: 24%; disagree: 51%; strongly disagree: 16%</i> <i>2008: Strongly agree: 16%; agree: 22%; disagree: 40%; strongly disagree: 22%</i>
f. Election ballots should be printed in other languages in areas where lots of people don't speak English. <i>2000: Strongly agree: 17%; agree: 49%; disagree: 22%; strongly disagree: 12%</i> <i>2008: Strongly agree: 18 %; agree: 30%; disagree: 27 %; strongly disagree: 25%</i>



Of more interest in the current analysis, however, are the changes or trends in FL policy questions since 2000. These are shown directly for each question in Table 1. It can be seen that, despite the often combative FL events during the Bush administration, there was little dramatic change in opinion. The second largest change was the six-point *decline* (from 78% to 72%) in support for an official English policy (Q1). Otherwise, there are only very small percentage-point changes in the other five items, with both items (Q2a and Q2d in Table 1) on taking FL in high schools showing 4-point gains. At the same time, when examined on their own in Table 1, the six Likert-scale items do show an increase in using the “strongly” response options.

In order to translate the Table 1 results into more comparative terms, then, they have recalculated in Table 2 to show the basic shifts in the more “pro” or less restrictive direction (and with the strongly pro and simple pro responses combined). Thus, the -18 percentage-point entry in Table 2 for the final (election ballot) item reflects the decrease from 66% to 48% in the proportions agreeing with this item. Overall, it can be seen in Table 2 that this change is by far the largest found across the decade, and is responsible for an overall average of a 2-point decline in 2008 across the seven items (from 57% to 55% per item). When summed across the seven items into a FLT index or score, it results in an overall slight decline – from 3.97 in 2000 to 3.86 in 2008 (rounded to 4.0 and 3.9 in Tables 3 and 6).

**Table 2: Overall Item 2000-2008 Changes in Pro-FL Responses\***

	<u>2000</u>	<u>2008</u>	<u>Change</u>
ITEM			
Q1* (English only)	22%	28%	<b>+ 6 points</b>
Q2a (HS FL)	76	80	<b>+4</b>
Q2b* (eliminate bilingual Ed)	78	77	<b>-1</b>
Q2c* (English unites all Americans)	24	23	<b>-1</b>
Q2d (FL as imp. as math & science)	64	68	<b>+4</b>
Q2e* (English threatened by FLs)	67	62	<b>-5</b>
Q2f (English-only ballots)	66	48 -18	<b>.63</b>
TOTAL	3.97	3.86	<b>-0.11 points</b>
Average	57%	55%	<b>2 points</b>

\* *After recoding in Pro-FL direction and Combining Strongly Agree and Agree Responses in Table 1*

*Demographic differences:* Table 3 examines average differences on these FLT scores (of 4.0 in 2000 and to 3.9 in 2008) for the five basic demographic predictor variables of gender, age, race/ethnicity, education and family income. These differences are adjusted for the correlations of the other predictors by use of the MCA regression program of Andrews et al (1972), designed by these survey statisticians to provide adjusted figures for each category of these predictors, once the other predictors are taken into account. Basically, what the MCA program thus does is to “make other things equal”, so that differences between men and women, for example, are adjusted for

their differing age, race, education, and family income characteristics. In addition, the MCA program then summarizes these differences with the use of  $\beta$  (Beta) correlation coefficients, which like other correlations varies between 0 (no difference) and 1.0 (maximum difference).

As can be seen in Table 3, the highest Betas among the five predictors in both years were for age (.21 in 2008 and .17 in 2000), education (.23 and .13), and ethnicity (.19 and .12). In neither year are either gender or income significant predictors. The higher Betas for 2008 reflect the higher scores for younger adults (4.6 for those 18-24 and 4.2 for those 25-34) vs. the 3.9 and 3.6 scores for those aged 55-64 and 65+, respectively. Further reflecting the polarization tendency noted above, the differences by age (and education) are larger in 2008 than 2000.

**Table 3: Differences in Foreign Language Policy Total (FLT) Score by Demographic Predictors: After MCA Adjustment the for Other Predictors**

<b>Demographic Predictors:</b>	<b>2008 FLT Score (mean=3.9)</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>2000 FLT score: (Mean=4.0)</b>	<b>Beta</b>
<b>Gender:</b>				
Male ( <i>n</i> =439)	3.8		3.8	
Female ( <i>n</i> =422)	4.0	..06 NS	4.1	.09 NS
<b>Age:</b>				
18-24 ( <i>n</i> =101)	4.6		4.3	
25-34(176)	4.2		4.1	
35-44 ( <i>n</i> =181)	4.0		4.0	
45-54 ( <i>n</i> =169)	3.7		3.9	
55-64( <i>n</i> =103)	3.9		3.8	
65+ ( <i>n</i> =137)	3.6	.21 ***	3.7	.17 *

<b>Race/Ethnic group:</b> White, non-Hisp ( <i>n</i> =587)	3.8		3.9	
African American ( <i>n</i> =114)	3.8		4.0	
Hispanic ( <i>n</i> =110)	4.5		4.4	
Asian, other ( <i>n</i> =50)	4.0	.19 *	4.4	.12 *
<b>Education:</b> Some high school ( <i>n</i> =104)	3.3		3.7	
High school grad. ( <i>n</i> =292)	3.6		3.9	
Some college. ( <i>n</i> =181)	3.9		3.7	
College grad ( <i>n</i> =219)	4.3		4.0	
Grad. school ( <i>n</i> =871)	4.5	.23 ***	4.1	.13 *
Income: Under \$20K (104)	4.0 3.8		3.9 4.0	
\$20-39.9K (240)	3.9 <u>3.8</u>		4.0 4.1	
\$40-59.9K (137)	<u>3.8</u>	.07 NS	3.9	.07 NS
\$60-77.9K (98)				
\$100+K (152)				
Refused, DK (128)				

NS Not significant

\* Significant at the .05 level

\*\* Significant at the .01 level

\*\*\* Significant at the .001 level

Differences by the demographic factor of education in Table 3 are of about the same magnitude as for age, and they reflect the significantly more pro-FL stance of the college educated (4.4) in relation to those with a high school degree or less (3.5). That is also reflected in their Beta coefficients of .23 and .13. Differences by the factor of race/ethnicity are also significant, but it is ethnic (Hispanic) groups that are different in their FL support and not racial groups. Blacks and Asians score the on FLT at about the same level as Whites do in both 2000 and 2008. Unlike the differences for age and education, they are no larger for ethnicity in 2008 than in 2000. As noted above, both before and these three demographic factors are taken into account, the slightly higher FLT scores for women and the more affluent are not statistically higher from men or the less affluent.

**Table 4: Differences in Language Policy Dimensions, Sociopolitical Predictors: (After MCA Adjustment for Other Predictors)**

<b>Sociopolitical Predictors:</b>	<b>2008 Flt score</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>2000 Flt score</b>	<b>Beta</b>
<b>Party ID:</b>				
Strong Democrat ( <i>n</i> =214)	4.0		4.3@	
Democrats ( <i>n</i> =58)	4.3		4.1	
Indep., Dem. ( <i>n</i> =93)	3.9		4.1	
Independents ( <i>n</i> =133)	3.9		4.0	
Indep., Repub. ( <i>n</i> =92)	4.1		4.0	
Republicans ( <i>n</i> =40)	3.6		3.7	

Strong Repub. ( <i>n</i> =142)	3.8	.09 NS	3.6	18 **
<i>Other</i> ( <i>n</i> =27)	3.9		4.1	

@ Different question wording in 2008

From Table 4 we see that Independent Republicans score higher (4.1) than Independents (3.9) and “not-strong” Democrats score higher (4.3) than strong Democrats who were about average at 4.0. There are two tentative conclusions here: first, support for FL is broadly based, regardless of party; and second, that support is stronger on the left and in the center of the political spectrum.

### Summary and Conclusions

In this analysis of changes in public FL attitudes since 2000, generally little change was apparent in the direction on six of the seven FLT items, indicating the overall stability of public opinion, as well as the comparability of the two surveys. Within specific questions there were some changes, but with the exception of increased opposition to bilingual ballots (driven by the older cohorts of respondents), the changes that did occur were in the positive direction. Moreover, these changes were most pronounced among the younger cohorts of respondents.

Previous research, including our own, has emphasized the multi-dimensional nature of FL policy attitudes, so that the finding that those who support English-only policies now also favor learning an FL in high school is something surprising; it may well be that the English-only issue, and its stalemate on the right, bilingual education (Wiley, *op cit.*), have become decoupled from the public perception of foreign language learning. One hesitates to advance too far out on any particular limb in offering hypotheses as to why this is the case, but nevertheless, it may be that language learning is not tied to immi-

gration (even in the case of Spanish, the most visible and largest immigrant language), or that Foreign Language learning in the public perception encompasses the breadth of FLs offered. Within the FL advocacy community, Spanish predominates, as it does in our K-12 and higher education enrollments; but this may not be evident to the public at large.

Of more concern in these policy deliberations, however, are the differences by age and cohort, because they signify that future generations may increasingly come to this debate with different assumptions and positions than their elders. It is not clear where these differences arose (or how strongly they are held compared to other issues), but it perhaps reflects their educational and cultural upbringing – being more exposed to teachers and fellow students from other cultures than previous generations. It may also reflect the increased exposure to these cultures via TV and the Internet. This indicates a potential and as yet latent groundswell of support for FL in the US, beyond current levels. If true, this opposes the binary formulation noted by Wiley (2007).

Most importantly, we see a clear break line for those born after 1975 who are more likely to support the teaching and learning of foreign languages, and less likely to support restrictive policies such as “English Only.” Further work is required to assess whether this “generation gap” correlates with the greater diversity of the younger population in the US, with changes in attitudes towards immigration among this generation, or with the potential for increased contacts with diverse elements of the population among this generation. In terms of language policy, we believe that this generation gap augurs well for a richer and more dynamic FL teaching and learning environment.

For LCTL policy, the signal result of the past decade, and perhaps the clearest indicator of progress in the LCTLs, has been the emphasis on LCTL programs for national well-being, and more concretely, language and national security (Brecht & Rivers, 2000, 2005).

This emphasis has met with apparent success in terms of establishing new Federal programs for supporting LCTLs in the nation's educational system, although the programs are generally limited in scope and their impact thus far is at best diffused and attenuated. Other programs include the Language Flagship, which has demonstrated the feasibility of training Anglophones in a relatively short time to professional levels of proficiency in an array of languages, the English for Heritage Speakers program, which "tops off" the English skills of immigrants, to the same level of professionally useful proficiency, and the National Language Service Corps and the National Virtual Translation Center.

Nevertheless, the LCTLs exist in a larger FL context, where the evident and sustained political and public opinion support for FLs in the US and for FL programming in the US never seems to translate into real reform or significant funding. For example, analyses of the applications to the Department of Education for its "Race to the Top" by the Joint National Committee on Languages showed that not one of the forty-plus applications included FL as a subject for investment (Edwards, 2010). More recently, Title VI/Fulbright-Hays programs have seen a 40% cut in funding; even as these programs have been repeatedly shown to be vital to the national interest over the past 50 years (Parker, *op cit.*, Brecht & Rivers, 2000; Brecht et al., 2007).

As to what might be done, the LCTLs have one inherent advantage over the CTLs, in terms of the real demand and stated requirements for a broad range of LCTLs for national security. This, in combination with the public support for FLs and the continued growth of the FL industry, argues that the number of groups with an interest in the expansion of LCTL programs may well be much larger than the professionally-based teacher and faculty oriented membership groups that have carried this message for the past decades. Other groups might be drawn from the translation and interpreting sector, the human language technology sector, the language testing and



language services sectors, to name a few. Each of these acknowledges that it is a beneficiary of the educational sector's activities in promoting LCTLs in the US. Early attempts to organize more broadly include the Translation and Interpreting Summit, held in conjunction with the annual meeting of the American Translators Association, and the organization of an industry-wide national committee on language standards under the auspices of ASTM (Bassett, 2011). These larger, pan-sector attempts at organizing a broad base for language as an educational subject and profession in the US might well lead to the more crucial test: can the LCTL field catalyze grass roots support for FL and improve its position in the American educational enterprise?

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