

Social Equity LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE



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At-Risk Communities, including Immigrants

The Effects of Ethnic Diversity and Economic Conditions on Enactment of English-Only Laws in the United States

Thursday 2:15 pm; Panel 2

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Abstract: English only laws (EOLs) mandate government employees to conduct business in English only. There is a huge discrepancy between the federal government's stance on EOLs in comparison to the position the majority of states and some local governments have taken. At the national level, there are numerous laws that prohibit discrimination based on national origin. In contrast, thirty-one states in the United States and more than 44 local governments have adopted EOLs that discriminate against limited English proficient (LEP) citizens.

EOLs are measures such as ordinances, statutes, constitutional amendments, policies, rules, and regulations that mandate people to speak English only by banning or restricting the use of other languages. Some of these laws are very restrictive, while others are less circumscribed because some commentators denominate them as merely symbolic. These measures deny LEP citizens equal access to public goods and services. LEP persons are individuals who are not proficient in understanding the English language. Although 90 percent of the population in the United States comprehends the English language, the LEP population is also equally substantial in number (about 9 percent of the population). In commenting on EOLs, we do not contest the hegemony of English or suggest that immigrants should not acquire proficiency in the language; instead, we simply oppose the enactment of discriminatory measures, whether symbolic or substantive, that forbid citizens and public servants from speaking languages other than English.

Contrary to popular misconception, most of the LEP populations are not illegal immigrants; rather they are persons residing in the United States legally; who perform their civic duties diligently, including payment of taxes. The LEP population is also committed to acquiring proficiency in the English language and obtaining education; which are necessary for economic growth or mobility in American society. In Los Angeles, for example, there are approximately 50,000 students on waiting lists for English language classes. Some of these courses are offered 24 hours per day to meet the demand. Similarly, in New York City, the waiting lists are so substantial that it can take up to 18 months for an immigrant to enroll into an adult English language class.

The purpose of this paper is to assess whether or not rates of unemployment and levels of ethnic diversity impact states adopting EOLs. We deployed logistic regression on 882 cases of cross-sectional time series data collected from 49 of the 50 contiguous states over the period 1990 through 2007. Our results indicate that economic conditions and ethnic diversity impact adoption of EOLs.