CONSTRUCTING A LANGUAGE PROBLEM: PATERNALISM, POWER
DEVALUATION, AND THE LEGITIMATION OF NATIVISM IN THE ENGLISH-ONLY MOVEMENT

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School
of the University of Notre Dame
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

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December 2013
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Rory McVeigh, Lyn Spillman, and Kraig Beyerlein for their invaluable insights on this paper and their moral support during the writing process. I am indebted especially to Rory who reviewed multiple drafts and always offered very prompt and useful comments. I am also grateful for the members of the Social Movements and Politics Training Seminar for their perceptive feedback on a later draft of the paper. Of that group, special thanks goes to Daniel Escher and Bryant Crubaugh.
INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the ongoing wave of U.S. immigration, a seemingly nativist movement emerged to advocate “English-only” or “official-English” policies at the state and federal level. Between 1984 and 2010, the movement successfully lobbied for legislation to make English the official language of 24 states and to restrict bilingual public education in three others. While opponents of these measures have been quick to label English-only laws as “anti-immigrant,” the interest groups and political figures chiefly responsible for passing these laws claim that their goal is to improve the social mobility of non-English-speaking immigrants. Indeed, some advocates ground their efforts in a “moral obligation” to help immigrants learn English and become productive citizens. This paternalistic rhetoric toward immigrants, along with the movement’s claim that language diversity is a critical threat to national unity, have evidently appealed to many Americans, generating widespread support for English-only policies.

Most attempts to explain the movement’s popularity have viewed language as a symbolic issue that represents broader concerns about status or cultural values (Citrin, Reingold, and Green 1990; Citrin, Reingold, Walters, and Green 1990; Moral 1995). According to this “status politics” perspective, conflict emerges when the values or customs of the dominant group, which have previously been a source of status or prestige, are threatened by changing cultural norms (Gusfield 1963; Page and Clelland 1978). This view suggests that cultural shifts toward multiculturalism signal a decline in
the legitimacy of traditional American values or practices. If Anglos and other native-born citizens have historically derived esteem from their traditional lifestyle, then they may perceive that their status position is threatened by ethnic diversity, especially when the value of diversity is legitimized by government policies like the Civil Rights Act or the Bilingual Education Act. Thus, restricting bilingual government services that “coddle” non-English-speaking immigrants and legitimize multiculturalism can be understood as an attempt to defend the cultural practices of English-speaking Americans and to enforce conformity to those values.

According to status politics theories, a group’s status is most threatened when its customs or values are becoming less common in society at large, because esteem is derived from widespread acceptance of and conformity to the group’s values. Anti-bilingual sentiments would thus be a reaction to immigrants’ unwillingness or inability to learn English and would be especially prominent where immigrants are, in fact, falling behind in language proficiency. However, we might expect a different outcome since we do not typically think of prestigious traits as those that everyone possesses. More often, esteem is derived from characteristics that are simultaneously rare and highly valued (Bourdieu 1984), which suggests that we might instead view status as a commodity that is valued and devalued according to the principle of supply and demand (McVeigh 2009). Following this logic, I consider the alternative prediction that the claims of English-only advocates could be most appealing where immigrants are actually making the greatest gains in language assimilation.

In addition to examining how status affects language politics, I also consider the role of class interests. On one hand, support for restrictive language policies may be the
result of competition for scarce resources between working-class natives and immigrant groups. Under certain structural conditions, ethnicity can become a salient collective identity around which a group mobilizes to strengthen its position in the economic market or to exclude other groups from competition (Olzak 1987, 1992; Nielson 1985). This form of ethnic competition has played an important role in many nativist movements, but restrictive language laws are an unconventional, if not counterproductive, means of restricting labor market competition. Indeed, if English-only support reflects a desire among natives to reduce labor market competition, why would they advocate policies that they claim will actually benefit their competitors? An alternative class-based explanation is that the nativist reaction represents broader fiscal concerns instead of direct competition. In this case, the nativist sentiments would be more common among middle-class taxpayers who resent government spending on social programs designed to benefit those who, in their estimation, are unworthy of assistance (Campbell, Wong, and Citrin 2006; Calavita 1996).

These two explanations—class interests and status—are often viewed as competing explanations for the popularity of English-only laws (e.g., Huddy and Sears 1995; see Calavita 1996 for a notable exception). However, several analyses of conservative and right-wing movements have demonstrated how class and status politics are actually linked (Beisel 1998; Luker 1984; McVeigh 2009). This promising line of research builds on Bourdieu’s (1984) insight that cultural symbols are often used to reinforce class distinctions and demonstrates how conservative movements often frame economic grievances in cultural appeals that reinforce status hierarchies. Building on this work, I examine several general questions related to English-only support: What
economic and cultural conditions are most likely to foster support for English-only education laws? If status and culture are important, what exactly constitutes a threat to the status position of native-born citizens? And, how can we make sense of the paternalistic rhetoric of the movement? I address these general questions through an analysis of county-level voting outcomes in five states that voted on proposals to eliminate bilingual education programs.

In my analysis, I first evaluate two paradigms for how status motivates intergroup conflict: the classic status politics perspective and status-based power devaluation. Using California Department of Education records on limited English proficiency (LEP) students, I examine the relationship between the rate of language acquisition among immigrant children and public support for an initiative intended to dismantle existing bilingual education programs. I find support for the status devaluation model, in that English-only policies tend to be more popular where immigrants are actually making the most gains in language proficiency. Secondly, in contrast to dominant theories that characterize status movements as “symbolic” reactions to declining cultural values that are largely disconnected from economic interests, my analysis demonstrates how status movements can combine cultural and economic concerns to generate mass appeal. I argue that the paternalistic framing of the English-only movement appeals simultaneously to wealthy Americans who resent paying for state-funded welfare programs and to working class voters whose economic and status interests are threatened by upwardly mobile immigrants. By calling attention to the alleged failure of immigrants to learn English, anti-bilingual legislation portrays them as unworthy of inclusion in American life and reinforces the categorical distinctions that produce enduring ethnic inequality (Tilly
1998). Ironically, this strategy seems especially effective in settings where immigrants are rapidly assimilating.
LANGUAGE POLITICS IN INTERNATIONAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Scholars have long recognized that language is a powerful source of political conflict in contexts as varied as developed democracies, communist states, countries with emerging liberal economies, and post-colonial states (Beer and Jacobs 1985). Separatist movements among French-speaking Canadians and the Basques in Spain, battles over what should be the *lingua franca* in India (English or Hindi), and standard Arabic usage versus French in Algeria are prominent examples. While language often plays a key role in explanations of interethnic conflict and even civil war (Horowitz 1985; Kaufman 2001, Laitin 2000), it is not clear in these literatures if language is used merely as a means to pursue economic or political ends (Laitin 2000; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Hobsbawm 1990; Brass 1991; Beer 1985), or if language claims instead indicate a desire to protect a group’s cherished cultural symbols (Kaufman 2001) or status position in a national community (Anderson 1983; Horowitz 1985).

In the U.S., fights over language policy have emerged periodically and are traditionally linked to major waves of immigration (Calavita 1984; Higham 1955; Ovando 2003; Schiffman 1998). Although the major surge of European immigration at the beginning of the twentieth century and the more recent wave of primarily Latin American and Asian immigrants are distinct in many ways, many of the nativist claims have remained consistent over time. Responding to the massive influx of eastern Europeans and Mediterraneans into the country’s emerging industrial cities, many native-
born Anglos advocated stricter immigration laws, claiming that the country would become divided along ethnic lines. Anti-immigration arguments often focused on language as the critical wedge that would create national disunity (Sagarin and Kelly 1985). A prominent voice in this debate was the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s, a national movement that enlisted millions of mostly middle-class Americans. An article in the Klan’s weekly publication to its members, *The Imperial Nighthawk*, summarized the group’s diagnosis of the language situation among immigrants and their prescriptive solution:

> Many of our public schools, I am told, do not teach English. Few of the emigrants past thirty years of age ever gain a speaking acquaintance with our language as it is spoken or written…. With that state of affairs, how in the name of God can they learn what Americanism means? Now, in order to change this dreadful situation, we must do many things, We must forever abolish the foreign-language newspaper; the English language must be taught in every school, public and private; parochial schools and all others must be forced to teach English out of English books.¹

We can compare that statement to the language in California’s Proposition 227:

> WHEREAS the English language is the national public language of the United States of America and of the state of California, is spoken by the vast majority of California residents, and is also the leading world language for science, technology, and international business, thereby being the language of economic opportunity…all children in California public schools shall be taught English by being taught in English. In particular, this shall require that all children be placed in English language classrooms. (CA Secretary of State 1998)

While the 1920s Klan certainly has a more overtly racist reputation than more recent nativist movements, it is interesting to note the similarity in claims, namely, that multilingualism is threatening to “Americanism” or national unity and that forcing English instruction in schools is an effective policy solution. Moreover, both the Klan and Proposition 227 advocates framed their appeals in paternalistic rhetoric about

¹ *The Imperial Nighthawk*, September 12, 1923.
teaching immigrants “Americanism” or helping them acquire “the language of economic opportunity.” These similarities illustrate that the contemporary English-only movement is not a periphery movement confined to recent American political discourse, but is instead part of a much larger and longer story of nativist reactions to immigration.
THE ENGLISH-ONLY MOVEMENT

The most recent push for English-only policies in U.S. began in the 1980s and continues today. The movement is primarily engaged on two legislative fronts: promoting state and federal laws to make English the official language, and promoting state referenda to eliminate bilingual instruction in schools. Between 1984 and 2010, twenty-four states passed “official English” legislation to make English the official language of the state and to require all government activities to be conducted only in English. All state ballot initiatives to make English the official language have passed, often with greater than 70 percent voting in favor of the proposal.

Also during this period, five states voted on proposals to eliminate bilingual education programs that were developed after the landmark Bilingual Education Act of 1968. Public support for restricting bilingual education has been more varied, with the majority tending to favor preserving some bilingual education programs (see Krashen 1996a, 1996b and Rosell and Baker 1996 for reviews of public opinion data on bilingual education). Among the five states that have voted on whether to implement English immersion instruction in place of bilingual programs, three states approved (California, Arizona, and Massachusetts) and two rejected (Colorado and Oregon) the proposed legislation (see table 1). In each of these contests, the margin of victory or defeat was relatively slim, especially when compared to voting on official-English. That is, despite the fact that some states approved and others rejected these measures, across-state
support for eliminating bilingual programs fell within the relatively narrow range of 44 to 63 percent. However, table 1 shows that there was substantially more variation in voting within states. For example, county voting returns for Arizona’s Proposition 203 indicate a spread of nearly 50 percentage points between the counties with the highest and lowest support. Similarly, public support for California’s Proposition 227 varied greatly across local communities, with a 40-percentage-point gap between San Francisco and Siskiyou counties. These facts suggest that explanations of differential support for anti-bilingual-education laws should pay special attention to how political and cultural conflicts are shaped by attributes of local communities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Year of Vote</th>
<th>% Voting in Favor</th>
<th>County with lowest support</th>
<th>County with highest support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>San Francisco (38%)</td>
<td>Siskiyou (78%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Apache (24%)</td>
<td>Mohave (72%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Conejos (27%)</td>
<td>Elbert (58%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Suffolk (41%)</td>
<td>Worcester (69%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Multnomah (27%)</td>
<td>Malheur (65%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Official-English and anti-bilingual education advocates present these policies as in the best interests of immigrants. For example, the website for U.S. English—the most prominent official-English interest group—claims that “the passage of English as the official language will help to expand opportunities for immigrants to learn and speak
English, the single greatest empowering tool that immigrants must have to succeed” (U.S. English 2013a). English proficiency, they argue, is the key to allowing newcomers to the U.S. to rise to a level playing field to compete with native-born citizens in the economic market for the American dream. Movement leaders also frequently highlight the importance of national unity based on common language. In response to the reintroduction of the “English Language Unity Act” by Senators Steve King and Jim Imhofe, the CEO of U.S. English, Mauro Mujica, stated: “The English language is the one factor that has the ability to unite all residents of the United States in our diversity” (U.S. English 2013b).

Proponents of laws to eliminate bilingual education programs make similar claims. California’s Proposition 227 mandated all California public schools to institute short-term (one-year maximum) “intensive sheltered English immersion” programs in place of the array of existing instructional strategies for English language learners. Opponents argued that a one-size-fits-all approach is not sensitive to the variable learning needs of non-native speakers and would require children to “sink or swim” in the educational system. But the rhetoric of the law’s supporters is not explicitly or overtly anti-immigrant, nor does it reflect a harsh sink-or-swim attitude toward English language learners. The actual text of the proposed law went so far as to ground the proposal in “moral obligation” to immigrants:

The government and the public schools of California have a moral obligation and a constitutional duty to provide all of California's children, regardless of their ethnicity or national origins, with the skills necessary to become productive members of our society, and of these skills, literacy in the English language is among the most important. (CA Secretary of State 1998)

Advocates of the initiative were much more likely to attack California’s educational system than the students the system was supposedly failing. Ronald Unz, the wealthy
software entrepreneur and architect of Proposition 227, frequently criticized the California Department of Education for its “95 percent annual failure rate” in teaching English to limited English proficient (LEP) students. The arguably misleading figure was based on estimates that only five to seven percent of LEP students were reclassified as fluent each year (Crawford 2000). On the surface, this rhetoric seems to be a defense of immigrant students, but such exaggerated claims might also be ways of making immigrants appear less educated or less motivated than they actually are.

Since English-only advocates ground their claims in a desire for efficient incorporation of newcomers, focusing their rhetoric particularly on language acquisition, the rate of English acquisition among immigrant groups could play an important role in shaping support for the movement. But it is not entirely clear if faster or slower language assimilation would produce more support for anti-bilingual policies. Undoubtedly, many supporters of the English-only movement sincerely believe that restrictive language policies are in the best interests of immigrants and their children, so support for the policies could increase when immigrants are falling behind in language acquisition.

However, there are reasons to doubt that sincere concern for immigrants is the primary explanation for the emergence and popularity of the English-only legislation. For instance, if genuine interest in teaching English to immigrants is the main goal of U.S. English, it is difficult to explain why the organization chose not to support legislation for new English Literacy Grants (Crawford 2000). Perhaps more importantly, considerable evidence indicates that today’s immigrants are becoming fluent in English at comparable or even faster rates than the European immigrants who came to the U.S. in the massive wave of immigration prior to World War I (Alba and Nee 2003; Citrin et al. 2007;
Fischer and Hout 2006; Portes and Rumbaut 2006). The familiar pattern of intergenerational linguistic assimilation persists for nearly all major contemporary immigrant groups: in the first generation, only a minority speak English fluently, but significant gains are made in the second generation and the vast majority of third-generation immigrants are fluent. Moreover, Citrin and colleagues (2007) found that the rate of intergenerational linguistic assimilation among Mexican-origin immigrants—the group that, more than any other, tends to be the focus of political debates about language policy—is the highest of all contemporary immigrant groups, and their comparison of 1980 and 2000 data reveals that this rate is increasing.

Given the relatively rapid language assimilation among Spanish-speaking immigrants, it is puzzling that English acquisition is seen as a social problem that must be addressed through restrictive language legislation. Perhaps this is less surprising when we consider the vast literature demonstrating the social construction of social problems (Burstein 1991; Burstein and Bricher 1997; Jenness and Grattet 2001). The key insight here is that public problems are not necessarily defined by objective circumstances, but instead reflect efforts of political actors, interest groups, social movement organizations, and other groups to use public issues to generate support for a particular political agenda. Based on this insight and in line with previous work on U.S. language policy (Calavita 1996; Campbell et al. 2006; Citrin, Reingold, and Green 1990; Citrin, Reingold, Walters, and Green 1990; Crawford 2000; Huddy and Sears 1995; Moral 1995), I consider the possibility that widespread support for official-English and anti-bilingual-education laws is the result of mobilized group interests, rather than a confluence of individuals who happen to be deeply concerned about immigrant incorporation. Moreover, my central
claim is that contests over language policy cannot be reduced to purely economic or purely cultural explanations. They involve a complex interplay of ethnic identities, immigration and assimilation patterns, protection of economic interests, cultural shifts toward multiculturalism, and strategic efforts to reproduce social hierarchies. To develop this theoretical framework, I outline several paradigms that have been used to explain conflict over group interests—ethnic competition, “new nativism,” status politics, and power devaluation—and articulate what the logic of these theories would lead us to expect about voting on anti-bilingual-education policies.
Early theories of racial and ethnic assimilation predicted that the rationalizing influence of capitalism and democracy would undermine racial prejudice, and that conflict would eventually give way to accommodation and assimilation of new ethnic groups into the mainstream labor market and society (Park 1950). In light of abundant empirical evidence that episodes of ethnic conflict continue to flare in democratic and industrialized settings, more recent theories have discarded the notion of inevitable accommodation of immigrant groups, and have instead focused on the propensity for ethnic conflict to emerge in settings where groups compete for scarce resources (Olzak 1987, 1992; Blalock 1967). According to this ethnic competition perspective, the probability of intergroup conflict increases with decreased segmentation of the labor market, high levels and/or rapid rates of immigration, and contraction of the economic sector (Olzak 1992). The entry (or increase) of new ethnic groups into an economic market where jobs and other material resources are scarce increases the supply of laborers, which decreases the bargaining power of all. In this competitive environment, there are incentives to mobilize around collective interests, and ethnicity becomes a salient solidary identity for collective action (Neilson 1985).

Under the competition logic, low-income residents are more likely to perceive immigrants as an economic threat since they are more likely to occupy a similar position in the market structure. The availability of work is also important, since competition for jobs is related to how difficult it is to secure one. So, if support for Proposition 227 is
really an attempt to restrict competition, we would expect voting to be highest where large or increasing immigrant populations reside in settings characterized by high unemployment or a high proportion of residents at the bottom of the income distribution. However, the application of the ethnic competition framework to this case is complicated by the fact that forcing immigrants to learn English is an unconventional means of restricting economic competition. In fact, competition would most likely increase if immigrants become fluent in English. What needs to be explained here is why the initiative was framed as an effort to improve immigrants’ educational advancement if the real motivation was to exclude them from economic opportunities. As I argue later, the power devaluation framework (McVeigh 2009) provides some leverage for answering this question.

The ethnic competition model predicts that nativist sentiments should emanate primarily from the economic interests of the working class, but there are good reasons to suspect that the interests of the middle and upper classes are also relevant. In her insightful analysis of California’s Proposition 187—an extreme proposal to bar undocumented immigrants from basic social services, including public education—Calavita (1996) argues that the “new nativism” is rooted in a “balanced-budget conservatism” (Plotkin and Scheuerman 1994) that views undocumented immigrants as an excessive tax burden. In Plotkin and Scheuerman’s (1994:32) terms, “balanced-budget conservatism elevates protecting taxpayer interests to the highest priority of government, [and] stigmatizes poorer, property-less people as somehow less than fully citizens.” This ideology has more recently been popularized by the Tea Party, a movement that vigorously opposes programs that redistribute economic resources to the unemployed, the
working poor, or to those who cannot afford adequate healthcare (Skocpol and Williamson 2012). Tea Party activists, for instance, continue to fight for the repeal of the Affordable Care Act, which, in their view, will require hard-working taxpayers to sacrifice income in order to fund government handouts to the undeserving.

Most new immigrants, even those with legal documentation, own little or no property and fall at the bottom of the income distribution, making them prime targets for this brand of fiscal conservatism. According to the immigrant-as-fiscal-burden thesis, immigrants are targeted not because they represent direct competition in the labor market, but because they are seen as undeserving recipients of tax-funded programs. Indeed, the paternalistic framing of English-only education initiatives is consistent with this argument. The notion of teaching immigrants English so they can strive for the American dream reinforces the liberal individualist belief that anyone can make it if they try hard enough, a belief that offers solace to those who want to keep their tax money and not feel guilty about the plight of the poor. I expect that this rationalization is more likely to develop in some contexts than others. For instance, in a recent study of Tea Party organizations, McVeigh et al. (forthcoming) demonstrate how collective understandings of distributive justice are shaped by structural attributes of local communities. In the case of the Tea Party, they find that views on how societal rewards should be allocated are strongly shaped by educational segregation, a form of social organization that places strong constraints on the development of diverse social ties.

If anti-bilingualism is in fact motivated by “balanced-budget conservatism,” then the English-only framing should be especially appealing in settings with higher proportions of wealthy individuals who resent paying taxes for social programs but are
resistant to engage in overtly nativist or racist actions. They can oppose programs that serve ethnic minorities on the grounds of fiscal responsibility, while simultaneously heralding the importance of equal opportunity. This is one aspect of what Bonilla-Silva (2006: 4) calls “color-blind racism,” an ideology that allows whites to “enunciate positions that safeguard their racial interests without sounding ‘racist.’” In contrast to long-standing beliefs that education levels and racial liberalism are positively related (Greeley and Sheatsley 1971; Hyman and Sheatsley 1964; Lipset 1960; Selznick and Steinberg1969; Taylor, Sheatsley, and Greeley 1978), some race scholars have argued that middle and upper social strata simply have more nuanced terminology or complex racial ideologies to mask racial prejudice (Jackman and Muha 1984). If wealthy voters resent being overtaxed to fund services for a burgeoning immigrant population in their local surroundings, their reaction is more likely to be some form of color-blind nativism than a more overt or direct form.

Unz and other prominent supporters of anti-bilingual-education policies often highlighted the excessive cost of bilingual programs and the potential cost savings associated with their proposed solution. The immigrant-as-fiscal-burden argument suggests that these kinds of claims should find the strongest resonance among those who carry a larger portion of the tax burden, that is, the middle and upper classes. Of course, fiscal conservatism is determined by more than just income. Since limited government and low taxes have become key tenets of the Republican Party platform, the effect of partisanship could also indicate whether fiscal concerns are driving anti-bilingual voting. For wealthy Republicans, preferences for lower taxes are legitimated by a party agenda that vilifies government intervention and welfare spending as the causes of societal
decline. Thus, if anti-bilingual sentiments emanate from fiscal conservatism, then anti-
bilingual laws should find especially strong support in prosperous communities that tend
to support the Republican Party.

In sum, class interests could influence support for Proposition 227 via two
potential pathways: perceived competition between immigrants and working-class
natives, and fiscal conservatism that views immigrants—and the social programs that
serve them—as an excessive tax burden. The former predicts high support in counties
with low income, and the latter indicates higher support in more affluent communities.
The competition mechanism should be strengthened where the proportion of foreign-born
residents is actually high, and the fiscal conservatism pathway should be most salient in
Republican strongholds.
STATUS POLITICS AND CULTURAL VALUES

An alternative approach is to view language politics in terms of status politics and cultural values. Instead of explaining the English-only movement in terms of economic interests, this framework attributes language restrictionism to native-born Americans’ resentment of cultural differences, and to their desire to win endorsement of traditional American values and to enforce conformity to those values.

Scholars have used the concept of status to explain a wide array of conservative political movements, including Know-Nothingism (Hofstadter 1967), the temperance movement (Gusfield 1963), right-wing extremism like the Ku Klux Klan and McCarthyism (Bell 1955; Hofstadter 1967; Lipset and Raab 1978), anti-pornography campaigns (Zurcher and Kirkpatrick 1976), and text book controversies (Page and Clelland 1978). A central argument of this work is that groups compete not only for political and economic influence but also for social status. Cultural competences—even ones as taken-for-granted as the ability to speak the native language fluently—become status markers around which groups can assert their moral superiority. There are several theoretical variants of the status politics model, which I describe below, but they all argue that status conflict is the result of declining societal commitment to dominant values or practices.

Early status politics theorists viewed right-wing political movements as an irrational backlash to status discontent, stemming from a decline in the group’s social or
economic influence (Gusfield 1963; Hofstadter 1967; Lipset and Raab 1978). In one strand of this research, actors engage in “status substitution” whereby generalized feelings of deprivation are redirected toward scapegoat targets, such as groups with different cultural practices or ethnic compositions, as a way to release frustration or anxiety (Lipset and Raab 1978). In line with these early status discontent models, some scholars claim that the English-only movement represents “the displacement of middleclass Anglo fears and anxieties from the more difficult, if not intractable, real causes of their fears and anxieties, to mythical and simplistic stereotyped scapegoats” (Fishman 1988: see also, Calavita 1996; Campbell et al. 2006; Schmid 1992). In this view, immigrants are blamed for social problems largely unrelated to them.

Another line of work explains conservative movements in terms of strategic battles over cultural symbols waged primarily by those who are declining in class mobility (Gusfield 1963). Having experienced losses in the economic realm, members of the declining class seek to reestablish a measure of power by buttressing their position in the status hierarchy through symbolic victories—such as state or federal legislation—that legitimate the group’s practices or customs. These groups often turn lifestyle choices, like alcohol consumption, into symbolic distinctions that confer social prestige. According to Gusfield’s (1963) classic analysis of the temperance movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the prohibition issue was a symbolic contest between native-born rural Protestants, who were losing economic influence due to urbanization and industrialization, and Catholic immigrants flooding urban centers. Because drinking behavior was an obvious distinction between native Protestants and Catholic immigrants, abstinence and drinking became cultural markers of position in the status hierarchy.
According to the classic status politics account, temperance advocates were motivated not so much by a desire to change the drinking behavior of immigrants as the need to validate the moral superiority of temperance as a way of life (Gusfield 1963).

Some scholars have critiqued Gusfield’s model, claiming that social groups are not neatly arranged into prestige hierarchies (Wallis 1977; Page and Clelland 1978; Wood and Hughes 1984). Thus, movements associated with status politics are grounded not in the desire to alter some underlying prestige system, but instead are genuine attempts to defend firmly held cultural values. This “politics of life style concern” approach (Page and Clelland 1978), as well as other perspectives that view socialization processes as the basis of conservative mobilization (Wallis 1977; Wood and Hughes 1984), stresses the role of “cultural fundamentalists,” a group defined by demographic and cultural characteristics that transcend class boundaries. Much of the existing scholarship on language politics has followed this defense of cultural values model, arguing that nationalism is the key determinant of English-only support (Citrin, Reingold, and Green 1990; Citrin, Reingold, Walters, and Green 1990; Moral 1995). According to this view, English proficiency is a salient symbol of American nationality, so an influx of non-English-speaking immigrants constitutes a threat to traditional Americanism.

All of these theories in the status politics literature—status substitution, classic symbolic politics, and defense of cultural values—hinge on the presence of an observable distinction between status groups. Indeed, it is highly unlikely that drinking behavior would have become a rallying point for a moral reform movement if immigrants were quickly adopting the temperate lifestyle promoted by the reformers. It was immigrants’ resistance to Protestant cultural values that turned temperance into a status conflict.
(Gusfield 1963). Where immigrants are assimilating and adopting the practices and norms of the dominant culture, the native group has no distinct lifestyle trait upon which to assert their moral superiority over immigrants.

The rhetoric of the English-only movement appears to reflect the concepts and logic of the defense of cultural values model. There are certain American values and lifestyles—particularly, the ability to speak English—that are championed by proponents of restrictive language laws. These sentiments are summed up in parochial statements like, “If they are going to live in America, they need to act American.” Such statements suggest a desire to defend and legitimate the cultural practices of native-born Americans and to enforce conformity to those values. Indeed, elites in the English-only movement often frame the struggle as a fight for the preservation and unity of American values (U.S. English 2013a). They suggest that bilingual services only coddle non-English-speaking residents and prolong their assimilation. Moreover, they claim that failure to take forceful action to ensure the supremacy of English in the U.S. endangers the entire American way of life that has made this country great (U.S. English 2013a).

Both the rhetoric of the English-only movement and classic status politics perspective suggest that we should see high support for anti-bilingual-education laws where the cultural value of a common English language is threatened. That is, voting in favor of Proposition 227 should be high in local settings characterized by relatively low rates of English acquisition among immigrants.
POWER DEVALUATION IN STATUS AND ECONOMIC MARKETS

I have outlined several theoretical paradigms that explain the English-only movement as either a strategic effort to protect class interests or a fight about status and values. McVeigh’s (2009) power devaluation theory provides a third alternative, which does not reduce the conflict to either class or status concerns. Although the theory is primarily about power in social relationships, it is based on the fundamental microeconomic principle that purchasing power in an exchange market is determined by the supply of, and demand for, what is offered in exchange. According to McVeigh, power is determined by exchange relationships in political, economic, and status dimensions. The purchasing power of a group depends upon the value of the “commodities” its members bring into these three markets. These might include votes, monetary contributions, and patronage in the political arena, or labor, goods, and wages in the economic exchange market. In the status market, certain behaviors, traits, and knowledge—what Bourdieu (1984) calls “cultural capital”—are exchanged for social esteem. A group experiences power devaluation when the supply of what it offers increases (e.g., the economic purchasing power of native-born wage laborers is diminished by an increased supply of immigrant labor) or when demand for what it offers decreases (e.g., the political purchasing power of a group’s votes is decreased when elected officials no longer depend on their support to stay in office). Conservative
movements, then, represent a group’s efforts to restore power by stimulating demand for or restricting supply of what they offer (McVeigh 2009).

The power devaluation framework offers two important contributions to my analysis of support for Proposition 227: a perspective on status that differs significantly from the dominant status politics model, and a framework for integrating the economic and cultural underpinnings of the English-only movement.

**English Proficiency and Status-based Power Devaluation**

According to the power devaluation perspective, status-based power depends on the prestige that an actor or group derives from displaying particular attributes or behaviors. In McVeigh’s (2009: 41) terms:

> [A]ctors gain prestige and esteem by adhering to and displaying behaviors and traits that are simultaneously admired and relatively scarce. If these traits or behaviors become increasingly common, then the purchasing power of the actor displaying such behaviors or possessing such traits undergoes devaluation.

Groups experiencing power devaluation in the status market will sometimes attempt to regain their social position by manufacturing public problems about values and culture. For instance, the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s invented an education crisis at a time when the quality of the educational system was actually improving. High school diplomas were at one time rare commodities but were becoming increasingly common, especially among Catholic immigrants and African Americans. The Klan’s framing of the issue—which simultaneously stigmatized the value of parochial schools and stimulated demand for public education—appealed to white Protestants who sensed a decline in the esteem they previously derived from a high school degree (McVeigh 2009).
In certain settings, English proficiency is exchanged for social esteem. Status-based power of native-born Americans, then, is generated by the scarcity of English proficiency, and it is devalued when English proficiency is more common. As first- and later-generation immigrants gain educational credentials and become increasingly indistinguishable from whites in language skills, the purchasing power of English proficiency is diminished because the overall supply is increased. Groups that previously monopolized this status indicator in the status exchange market have incentive to act to protect the value of their commodity. Because group differentiation is the basis for valuation in the status market, one potential strategy for alleviating status-based power devaluation is to stigmatize the other group. Thus, if language proficiency is a status indicator, native-born citizens can secure their position in the hierarchy through public, symbolic actions that cast doubt on the ability or willingness of immigrants to learn English. In other words, English-only legislation can be viewed as a symbolic gesture that paints immigrants as either uninterested in learning English without being forced, or as intellectually incapable of doing so.

Status politics and status-based power devaluation theories both emphasize the importance of whether or not immigrants adopt the cultural values of native residents. However, the status politics perspective views immigrants’ resistance to learn English as a threat to the status of native-born citizens, whereas the power devaluation mechanism interprets immigrants’ efficient acquisition of English as a devaluation of native-born status. Applying the power devaluation model to voting on anti-bilingual-education laws results in the counterintuitive prediction that support for the initiative should be highest in
local settings where the rate of English acquisition among immigrants is actually high, the opposite of the status politics prediction.

*Bridging Class and Status Politics*

Both status discontent (Gusfield 1963; Hofstadter 1967; Lipset and Raab 1978) and life-style concern (Page and Clelland 1978; Wood and Hughes 1984) versions of the status politics perspective view status and class as analytically distinct dimensions of social conflict. Status discontent theorists might identify the “old middle class” as the primary supporters of moral reform, but their theories intentionally divorce symbolic prestige-oriented actions from the rational pursuit of economic interests. Other status theories that push the classless concept of cultural fundamentalism eliminate class interest as a potential explanatory factor. They focus on cultural values and lifestyles to the exclusion of class-related explanations. On the other side, as I have argued above, competition-based theories of conflict (Olzak 1987, 1992; Blalock 1967; Neilson 1985) are also unable to provide a complete explanation of the English-only movement. Ethnic competition can explain nativism in terms of class interests and ethnic solidarity, but it cannot explain how a policy that claims to advance immigrants’ educational and occupational mobility is actually a means of excluding them from economic participation.²

² An important thread in the language politics literature has examined status and class simultaneously, pitting symbolic politics theories against defense of “realistic interests” explanations (Huddy and Sears 1995; see also, Sears, Lau, Tyler, and Harris 1980). While the strategy of examining economic and status arguments together is good one, previous scholarship has treated instrumental and cultural motivations as competing mechanisms but stops short of explaining how the two might interact.
However, some scholars have incorporated status concerns into explanations of conservative movements without abandoning the role of class dynamics (Luker 1984; Beisel 1998; McVeigh 2009). For instance, as Beisel (1998) points out in her analysis of Victorian Era moral reform movements, the cultural capital that stems from occupying a higher position in the status hierarchy is often the key to accessing networks and opportunities for economic advancement (see also Bourdieu 1984). Actions that appear on the surface to be motivated by differing cultural values can also be attempts to solidify class position for oneself or, in Beisel’s case, for one’s children. Using a similar logic, McVeigh (2009) argues that the success of the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s was due in part to the group’s ability to frame the economic grievances of their middle class constituents using cultural claims that appealed to white, native-born Protestants. Rural whites—whose economic prospects were threatened by urban industrialization fueled by the seemingly endless flow of European immigrants to cities—were quick to latch on to the Klan’s rhetoric about Catholic immigrants’ allegiance to the Pope, their intellectual or moral inferiority, and even their unwillingness to learn English.

The power devaluation model is able to integrate status and economic concerns in a couple ways. First, according to the theory, when a group faces devaluation in only one dimension of power—economic, political, or status—they can compensate for the loss by leveraging power in the other dimensions. However, when the purchasing power of a group is simultaneously devalued in multiple realms (i.e., both economic and status markets), the incentive to act to preserve the group’s power is multiplied (McVeigh 2009). Second, status and class represent two distinct but overlapping exchange markets. The Klan successfully rallied support for their public education initiative in the 1920s.
because native-born whites resented how the popularity of Catholic education devalued the prestige of their public education credentials, and because they sensed that their class mobility would be threatened if their public education became less valuable in the economic market (McVeigh 2009; see also, Beisel 1998). Clearly, the boundaries of class and status groups overlap. Therefore, by connecting the economic interests of native-born Americans to status-oriented claims about the cultural, moral, or intellectual inferiority of other ethnic groups, the Klan was able to garner widespread support for its education policy (McVeigh 2009).

In a similar way, anti-bilingual-education laws address economic concerns about labor market competition not by directly excluding immigrants from economic opportunities—as ethnic competition theory would predict—but instead by calling attention to immigrants’ alleged lower education and language proficiency and their unworthiness to benefit from economic or political opportunities.

To unpack this claim, it is important to understand how laws can be used to stigmatize certain groups. Scholars have noted that legislative debates are especially important battlegrounds for cultural conflicts because laws are powerful symbols (Edelman 1977; Gusfield 1963). One of the most fascinating insights from Gusfield’s (1963) *Symbolic Crusade* is that laws have the potential to confer symbolic victories to one group in a status conflict, enhancing that group’s social esteem and strengthening their position in the status structure. Laws can simultaneously legitimate the cultural values of one group while stigmatizing the values of another. Whereas conflicts in the political and economic spheres are often over objective resources—such as jobs or seats
in Congress—struggles for status dominance are much more about symbolic resources—like legitimacy, prestige, and esteem.

Cultural theorists have developed some helpful tools for understanding how a law or policy might stigmatize a group. Specifically, Alexander (2006) argues that “binary cultural codes” structure discourse in civil society and that studies of social cleavage and intergroup conflict must account for the symbolic codes that provide the scaffold for this discursive structure. The simplest way to conceptualize the binary is “pure” versus “impure.” Alexander elaborates:

Binary codes supply the structured categories of pure and impure into which every member, or potential member, of civil society is made to fit. It is in terms of symbolic purity and impurity that centrality is defined, that marginal demographic status is made meaningful, and high position understood as deserved or illegitimate. (2006: 54-55)

In other words, the symbolic codes of civil discourse categorize society into those who deserve inclusion in civil society (the civil narrative) and those who do not (the uncivil narrative). According to Alexander, political and cultural conflicts are not disputes over the nature of the discursive categories, but over assigning individuals, events, and groups to the two opposing narrative structures. The symbolic content of the opposing narratives is generated by listing the kinds of people, relationships, and institutions that make democratic societies flourish (civil narrative) or deteriorate (uncivil). Because effective democracy depends upon individual autonomy and initiative, individuals with these qualities are viewed as worthy of inclusion, while passivity and dependence characterize those who should be excluded (Alexander 2006).

Through this lens, we can begin to see how a law that restricts bilingual services as a way to encourage immigrants to quickly learn English attributes uncivil qualities to immigrants (e.g., Ronald Unz’s repeated references to the “95 percent failure rate” of
LEP students to learn English). If immigrants must be forced to learn English, this implies passivity and dependence, characteristics that merit exclusion from civil society. Ironically, legislation aimed at fostering assimilation of immigrants can actually further solidify categorical distinctions between native-born citizens who are worthy of inclusion and “dependent” immigrants who are not.

The paternalistic, but stigmatizing, framing of Proposition 227 should find strongest resonance where upwardly mobile immigrant populations are challenging long-standing class and status distinctions between native- and foreign-born residents. As English-only advocates correctly point out, the most telling indicator of immigrants’ social and occupational trajectory is probably English fluency. So, a high rate of English acquisition among immigrants is a positive indicator of assimilation and a sign that categorical distinctions are breaking down. Under these conditions, native residents—especially those in the lower class and status strata—are likely to experience economic and status-based power devaluation, which creates the necessary incentive for collective action. If they perceive that immigrant inclusion is the source of their problems, then they are more likely to support anti-bilingual policy initiatives that describe immigrants as less educated, indolent, or intellectually inferior.

In sum, the power devaluation model offers an alternative explanation to status politics theory, and it integrates status and economic concerns. The theory predicts that high rates of English acquisition, which indicate positive social mobility among immigrants, should lead to devaluation in the status-based power of native-born citizens and, consequently, to higher support for English-only laws. This effect should be strongest in settings where upwardly mobile immigrant groups are challenging both the
status and class positions of working class voters. Translating this into empirical terms, I expect to find strong English-only support in local settings characterized by high rates of English acquisition and low median incomes.
METHODS AND DATA

Much of the work on language restrictionism has focused on explaining variation in individual attitudes (e.g., Citrin et al 1990; Huddy and Sears 1995; Moral 1995; Schmid 1992). The results of these studies are important for understanding the popularity of English-only laws, but individual-level analyses are limited in their ability to tell us how group interests and local context influence perceptions of economic or status threat (see Quillian 1995), which is a key goal in this paper. Moreover, I have given special attention to the paternalistic rhetoric of English-only initiatives and why that framing might resonate in certain settings but not others. For these reasons, I focus on counties as the unit of analysis. Although there are always limitations to methodological choices, examining counties—a geographic unit that closely approximates the environment an individual observes in daily life—is a logical choice for understanding how processes of competition and status preservation play out in local settings.

I analyze variation in election outcomes (percent voting in favor) across counties in five states that voted on proposals to eliminate bilingual education programs (Arizona, California, Colorado, Massachusetts, and Oregon). My strategy for addressing the key research questions of this paper is two fold. I begin by focusing on voting outcomes for California’s Proposition 227, which was the first of the five state ballot initiatives on this issue and it served as a catalyst for the others. The California Department of Education kept detailed records on limited English proficiency (LEP) students in the years
preceding this statewide vote, which allows me to analyze the relationship between
voting and the rate of English acquisition among immigrant children. As I have argued
above, status politics and status-based power devaluation yield opposite predictions for
this relationship. I use several techniques—spatial mapping, cross tabulations, and
ordinary lease squares (OLS) regression—to maximize confidence in the findings.
Second, I expand the analysis to include counties in all five states and use OLS regression
to evaluate arguments about economic interests. The theoretical arguments I have
developed relate to variation across local communities (or counties), but I acknowledge
that there are also important state-specific conditions that undoubtedly affected voting
results. The demographic and political dynamics of Arizona, for example, are distinct
from those in Oregon. In order to control for these state-level effects and to focus on
variation across counties, I include dummy variables for each state.

Measuring the Rate of English Acquisition

A central aim of this paper is to compare two mechanisms by which status
cconcerns could influence language politics. Status politics predicts that support will be
highest where common cultural values or practices are becoming less common, whereas
status-based power devaluation makes the opposite prediction. When it comes to political
battles over language policy, the cultural value in question is the ability to speak English
fluently. U.S. Census data include measures of percent foreign-born and even the
percentage of LEP residents in a county. However, the critical factor for evaluating the
two status theories is not necessarily the presence of LEP immigrants in a local
community, but rather the rate at which LEP immigrants are becoming fluent in English. This is much more difficult to measure and is certainly not captured in the census data. But since the fight over bilingual education is actually about whether or not immigrant children are learning English in public schools, a measure of the rate of English acquisition among LEP students might be more appropriate. Fortunately, the California Department of Education kept meticulous records related to LEP students in the years prior to the vote on Proposition 227 in 1998, including a measure for the percent of students redesignated from LEP status to FEP (fluent English proficient) in each county. The value is calculated by dividing the number of redesignated students by the prior year's LEP count, then multiplying by 100. Students redesignated to the FEP category were evaluated on multiple criteria and determined to have an English proficiency comparable to an average native English-speaking student. The variable in my analysis is the average of the three years of data leading up to the vote in 1998. In more general terms, I argue that this variable captures the rate at which non-English-speaking immigrants in the county are assimilating, which again is the key factor that distinguishes the two opposing theories of status.

Because this measure is calculated as a quotient, small values in the numerator or denominator could lead to distorted variable values. For instance, if five students are redesignated from LEP to FEP in a county but there were only ten total LEP students that year, then the result would be a 50 percent redesignation rate, which would make that county an extreme outlier in the multivariate regression models. To address this

3 Of the five states that held anti-bilingual-education ballot initiatives (Arizona, California, Colorado, Massachusetts, and Oregon), California is the only state that tracked the rate at which LEP students were transitioning to fluency. The exceptional data available in California is one reason I have chosen to focus on the vote in this state. Data are available at http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/.
challenge, I have excluded counties with fewer than 100 students who are not native English speakers and counties with fewer than 3,000 total students enrolled in public schools. This yields a total of 49 counties out of the 58 counties in California.4

Measures for Evaluating Class Interests

To examine class interest arguments, I include several indicators derived from the 2000 U.S. Census, the decennial census immediately prior to voting.5 Competition theories claim that ethnic conflict stems from a combination of intergroup contact and scarce economic resources. According to Olzak’s (1987) classic formulation of the theory, contact between immigrants and native residents is positively correlated with the size of the immigrant population, which I measure as the percentage of the total population that is foreign born. Competition should be greater where economic resources, like jobs and income, are scarce, so I consider both unemployment rate (as a percentage of the civilian population 16 years and older in the labor force) and median household income in 2010 dollars (adjusted for inflation). The crux of ethnic competition theory is that conflict emerges where scarcity and intergroup contact occur simultaneously, so I construct an interaction term that for percent foreign born and median income. “New nativism,” on the other hand, links anti-bilingualism to conservative fiscal ideology, not competition. This leads to the opposite prediction for median income (i.e., support should increase with income). I have argued that this effect would be strengthened by

4 The following counties met the criteria for exclusion from multivariate analysis: Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Mariposa, Modoc, Mono, Plumas, Sierra, and Trinity.

5 The vote in California was in 1998, two years prior to the 2000 census. I also estimated models using 1990 census data for California and 2000 data for all other states and results did not deviate in any meaningful way. See table 1 for the year of each state’s vote.
partisanship (variable described below), so I also create an interaction term that combines median income and percent Republican.

Control Variables

There are a number of other factors that are not related to my theoretical arguments but could influence voting on English-only education proposals. Because language policy debates occur in the realm of partisan politics, it is important to account for partisanship within counties. I control for this using the percentage of voters in the county that voted for the Republican candidate in the 1996 presidential election, which pitted Republican Bob Dole against the incumbent, Bill Clinton. 6 Although many Democrats support English-only laws, the issue has become more associated with the Republican Party, so I expect Republican counties to show greater anti-bilingual support.

Other controls were obtained from the 2000 U.S. Census data. Counties with large, dense populations are more likely to be ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse, which could make residents in urban counties more open to multiculturalism and bilingualism. To account for this, I control for the total population of the county (natural log) and population density (number of residents per square mile). Previous studies on the English-only movement have also found that, despite the claims of English-only elites, Latinos tend to be less in favor of restrictive language laws than Anglos (Citrin et al. 2007; Schmid 1992). We know less about how other racial and ethnic groups view this issue, but Asians or blacks might also have a tendency to resist laws that appear to be

6 Voting data were obtained from Dave Liep’s Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections, http://uselectionatlas.org/.
anti-multicultural, so I include control variables for *percent Latino*, *percent Asian*, and *percent black*. Finally, educational attainment could also influence views on this issue, as many scholars argue that education is positively correlated with cultural and ethnic liberalism. I control for this with a measure of the percentage of the population 25 years and older who have earned a Bachelor’s degree or higher. Table 2 provides descriptive statistics for all variables used in the statistical models.

### Table 2

**UNIVARIATE STATISTICS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Voting for Anti-Bilingual Law</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>53.64</td>
<td>12.66</td>
<td>24.29</td>
<td>78.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% LEP Students Redesignated Fluent</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>9.76</td>
<td>10.04</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>66.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Household Income (in $1000)</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>52.43</td>
<td>13.99</td>
<td>25.56</td>
<td>108.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Republican</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>49.33</td>
<td>13.23</td>
<td>15.70</td>
<td>79.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Population (log)</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>10.89</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>6.32</td>
<td>16.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population Density (1000 per sq. mi.)</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>16.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Latino</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>16.61</td>
<td>15.38</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>80.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Asian</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>30.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Black</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>20.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Unemployed</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>6.60</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>21.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% with Bachelor Degree or Higher</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>22.87</td>
<td>10.63</td>
<td>8.69</td>
<td>57.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Foreign Born</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>9.14</td>
<td>8.24</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>37.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RESULTS

Figure 1 represents support for Proposition 227 across California counties. The spatial map separates counties into quartiles based on percent voting in favor of the initiative. Dark areas represent high support while light-colored counties indicate low support. Similarly, figure 2 depicts rates of assimilation (based on the rate of English acquisition measure described above) across counties; again, dark shading indicates higher rates of assimilation and lighter colors represent slower assimilation. While spatial mapping does not control for other relevant factors, it can give us a broad overview of the relationship between variables. In this case, there is significant overlap between voting and assimilation. Overall, counties—and groupings of counties—that are darker in one map tend to be darker in the other, and lighter areas in one map tend to be lighter in the other. This relationship is especially revealing in light of the distribution of immigrant populations represented in figure 3, which shows substantially less overlap with antibilingual voting. While we might expect English-only support to correspond closely to concentrations of immigrant populations—which presumably consist of relatively high concentrations of non-English speakers—these figures suggest that nativist attitudes could instead be driven less by the presence of immigrants than the rate at which they were assimilating.
Figure 1. Spatial Map of Voting Outcomes for Proposition 227 in California Counties

Figure 2. Spatial Map of Rates of Assimilation in California Counties
As I have argued above, if support for Proposition 227 is explained by classic status politics or defense of cultural values theories, then support should be high where the rate of language assimilation is low. But if language restrictionism instead stems from status-based power devaluation, then support should increase as the rate of language assimilation increases. The spatial maps suggest a positive relationship between assimilation rates and anti-bilingual support, but I want to test this with more rigorous, multivariate analysis. Table 3 presents the results of OLS regression on voting in California counties. Model 1 confirms that the rate of assimilation has a positive and statistically significant effect on voting net of ethnic demographics, partisanship, income, population, and population density. These results are consistent with the status-based power devaluation argument, indicating that anti-bilingual support tends to be highest in local settings where immigrants are making the most gains. It is worth noting again that English-only advocates present their policies as solutions to the social problem of slow language assimilation among non-English-speaking immigrants, solutions which are designed to force immigrants to learn English in order to improve their chances of successful incorporation into mainstream society. It is ironic, then, that support for these

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7 Because of the limited number of cases in the analysis (N=49), I have taken steps to ensure the models in table 3 are not strained by including too many variables. I separate analyses, I ran models with other control variables, including two measures of change in foreign-born population from 1990-2000 (percentage change in the foreign-born population and percentage-point change in the proportion of foreign-born residents), various measures of race/ethnic segregation, racial heterogeneity, percent black, percent with bachelor degree or higher, percent unemployed, and proportion of students with native language other than English. With one exception, these additional variables were not statistically significant predictors of the dependent variable, nor did they affect the direction or statistical significance of the assimilation coefficient. When percentage change in the foreign-born population is included, the rate of assimilation coefficient is still positive but only marginally significant (p<.0.1). To keep the final models as simple as possible, I have not included these additional control variables in the results displayed in table 3.
policies is strongest where immigrants are assimilating rapidly on their, without being pressured to do so through restrictive language laws.

The power devaluation model also predicts that status concerns and class interests should be interrelated predictors of language restrictionism. In this case, I evaluate the possibility that the effect of the rate of language assimilation might be different for affluent and relatively poor counties. As an initial test, I dichotomize the dependent

### TABLE 3

**OLS ESTIMATES OF VOTING IN FAVOR OF PROPOSITION 227 FOR CALIFORNIA COUNTIES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rate of Assimilation</td>
<td>0.288**</td>
<td>0.146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.104)</td>
<td>(0.104)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Household Income (in $1000)</td>
<td>-0.068</td>
<td>-0.068</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.044)</td>
<td>(0.040)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Republican</td>
<td>0.617***</td>
<td>0.646***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.062)</td>
<td>(0.057)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Population (log)</td>
<td>0.073</td>
<td>0.081</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.458)</td>
<td>(0.414)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population Density (1000 per sq. mi.)</td>
<td>-0.425</td>
<td>-0.468</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.292)</td>
<td>(0.264)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Latino</td>
<td>-0.170</td>
<td>-0.181*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.087)</td>
<td>(0.079)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Asian</td>
<td>-0.330</td>
<td>-0.343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.190)</td>
<td>(0.172)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Foreign Born</td>
<td>0.270</td>
<td>0.287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.196)</td>
<td>(0.177)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate of Assimilation X Median Income</td>
<td>-0.023**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.007)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**R-squared**

0.870 0.896

*Note:* Standard errors in parentheses; N = 49. Coefficients for intercepts are not reported.

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05 (two-tailed tests)
variable, rate of English acquisition, and median income, with 0 indicating values below the median and 1 indicating values above, and I run a simple 3-way cross tabulation. The results displayed in figure 4 show that the positive effect of language acquisition is strongest in less prosperous counties. Over 75 percent of poor counties with high rates of language assimilation strongly favored Proposition 227, compared to only 25 percent of wealthy counties with similar assimilation rates. This finding is corroborated by regression analysis. In model 2 of table 3, I add an interaction term for the rate of assimilation and median income. All variables included in interaction terms are centered on their mean values, so the significant coefficient for the interaction term indicates that the positive effect of language assimilation is even stronger in counties with lower than average income. This suggests that the rhetoric of the Proposition 227 campaign resonated with voters in settings characterized by upwardly mobile immigrant populations and economic scarcity.

This significant interaction of assimilation rates and income helps explain some inconsistencies in the visual comparison of support for Proposition 227 (figure 1) and assimilation (figure 2). The most noticeable disparity is the bay area, a region known to be both more affluent and more liberal than the rest of the state. Counties in this region showed the least support for Proposition 227 but they have relatively high rates of language assimilation, which appears to contradict my argument. But these are also the most prosperous counties in the entire state, with median incomes ranging from $68,000 to $97,000.8 If immigrants’ rapid acquisition of language skills does in fact represent a threat to the status position of native residents, then we would expect that threat to be

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8 In 2010 inflation-adjusted dollars. Ten of the fifteen California counties in the top quartile for median income are in this small region.
most salient in less prosperous areas where natives occupy positions in the social hierarchy that are closer to that of immigrants, and less salient in affluent areas where even rapidly-advancing immigrants pose no threat to the cultural dominance of wealthy residents. Therefore, it is not surprising that rapid assimilation in the affluent bay area counties did not translate into support for an anti-bilingual-education law. If anything, this finding actually strengthens my claim that language assimilation is an indicator of status conflict.

So far, my analysis has focused on the effect of English acquisition among immigrants to evaluate power devaluation and status politics theories as explanations of conflict over English-only laws, and I have also demonstrated that status is a more powerful motivator in some economic conditions than others. But I also want to more directly test competing arguments related to class interests. Median household income is the crucial variable, because this indicates whether support tends to be strongest in relatively well-off counties or where residents tend to be lower in the income distribution. If working class competition with immigrants is driving voting then I expect to see a negative effect of income; if “new nativism” and fiscal conservatism are the primary motivators then I should find a positive effect. Because I am shifting focus away from the measure of language assimilation that was only available for California, I am now able to expand the analysis to include counties in all five states that voted on anti-bilingual-education laws.

Table 4 presents results of regression analysis of voting in all five states. Because the larger number of cases (N=186) provides more statistical degrees of freedom, I include a few additional control variables that could influence voting: percent black,
TABLE 4

OLS ESTIMATES OF VOTING IN FAVOR OF ANTI-BILINGUAL-EDUCATION INITIATIVES FOR AZ, CA, CO, MA, AND OR COUNTIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Median Household Income</td>
<td>0.186**</td>
<td>0.174**</td>
<td>0.199**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.061)</td>
<td>(0.061)</td>
<td>(0.061)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Republican</td>
<td>0.414***</td>
<td>0.426***</td>
<td>0.401***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.054)</td>
<td>(0.053)</td>
<td>(0.053)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Population (log)</td>
<td>0.193</td>
<td>0.032</td>
<td>0.085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.352)</td>
<td>(0.358)</td>
<td>(0.351)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population Density (1000 per sq. mi.)</td>
<td>-0.214</td>
<td>-0.317</td>
<td>-0.278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.397)</td>
<td>(0.397)</td>
<td>(0.393)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Latino</td>
<td>-0.095</td>
<td>-0.108</td>
<td>-0.098</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.059)</td>
<td>(0.058)</td>
<td>(0.058)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Asian</td>
<td>-0.856***</td>
<td>-0.716***</td>
<td>-0.517*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.194)</td>
<td>(0.205)</td>
<td>(0.243)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Black</td>
<td>0.073</td>
<td>0.081</td>
<td>-0.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.197)</td>
<td>(0.195)</td>
<td>(0.198)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Foreign Born</td>
<td>0.175</td>
<td>0.215</td>
<td>0.130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.130)</td>
<td>(0.130)</td>
<td>(0.130)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Bachelor Degree or Higher</td>
<td>-0.091</td>
<td>-0.087</td>
<td>-0.116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.084)</td>
<td>(0.084)</td>
<td>(0.084)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Unemployed</td>
<td>0.037</td>
<td>-0.079</td>
<td>0.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.219)</td>
<td>(0.225)</td>
<td>(0.216)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Income X % Republican</td>
<td>0.005*</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.010*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.807</td>
<td>0.812</td>
<td>0.813</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; N = 186. Coefficients for intercepts and for state-level dummy variables are not reported. *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05 (two-tailed tests).

percent with bachelor’s degree or higher, and percent unemployed. What is perhaps most striking about model 1 is that support for English-only education seems to be driven by relatively few factors. Not surprisingly, conservative-leaning counties tend to favor the laws, since the Republican Party in many ways incorporated the English-only position into their platform. But voting on the measure does not appear to be directly affected by
the size of the population, whether the county is urban or rural, educational achievement, or even ethnic demographics (apart from the surprisingly strong and negative effect of percent Asian). Most importantly for my theoretical arguments, median income is indeed one of the few significant predictors of voting. The positive and significant coefficient indicates that anti-bilingual support tends to be higher in relatively prosperous counties, which is consistent with Calavita’s (1996) immigrant-as-fiscal-burden thesis. If the positive effect of income does in fact represent resentment over tax-funded government services for the poor, then we would expect this effect to be strongest in Republican strongholds where beliefs about low taxes and limited government are incorporated into and legitimated by a broader political identity. Results presented in model 2 of table 4 support this view. The positive and significant interaction of percent Republican and median income indicates that the positive effect of income is even stronger in counties where Republicans outnumber Democrats.

While the positive effect of income on voting undermines the ethnic competition argument, I include one final step in the analysis to more formally test the competition model. In model 3 of table 4, I add an interaction term to see if the effect of median income changes based on levels of immigration. The negative and statistically significant coefficient for the interaction indicates that support for English-only education laws in poorer counties is higher when the immigrant population is large, a finding that is consistent with the competition argument.\(^9\) Taken together, then, results presented in table 4 suggest that the claims of the English-only movement were more resonant in affluent settings than poor ones—providing strongest support for the new nativism

\(^9\) Ethnic competition theory also predicts that the co-occurrence of high immigration and high unemployment would produce a nativist response. However, the interaction of percent foreign born and percent unemployed is not statistically significant (model not displayed).
thesis—but that competition dynamics did drive up voting in counties where large immigrant populations threatened the economic security of lower-income communities.

The results presented above point to two distinct sets of conditions that fostered receptivity to Proposition 227’s claims about immigrant’s slow language assimilation and its proposed solution to this problem, namely, to eliminate bilingual education programs. Importantly, these distinct pathways to language restrictionism are only discernable when we integrate status and class theories of intergroup conflict. First, my findings support Calavita’s (1996) argument that the “new nativism” is grounded in a conservative ideology that elevates the moral position of taxpayers above poorer citizens who do not deserve government assistance, an ideology that should be most prominent in relatively affluent and politically conservative communities. Second, support is also high in less prosperous communities where immigrants are assimilating quickly, at least in terms of English fluency. In this case, it is not necessarily the presence of immigrants but rather the rate at which immigrants are adopting dominant cultural values that drives the nativist reaction. Intuitively, it makes sense that status concerns would fuel nativism in settings with more working class residents but not in wealthier communities, because we would not expect the middle class to perceive immigrants as a status threat—their concern is more about shouldering the load for government-funded social services. However, the social status of working class voters, who generally have lower levels of educational and cultural capital, is much more likely to be threatened by upwardly mobile immigrant groups. As immigrants, and their children, become increasingly indistinguishable from working-class Anglos in language and educational attainment, the latter experience a decrease in the esteem derived from these status markers. As the power devaluation
model predicts, when status devaluation and economic devaluation occur simultaneously, conservative mobilization—a nativist reaction in this case—is likely to occur.
CONCLUSION

Beginning in the 1980s, a seemingly nativist movement to restrict bilingual government services gained widespread popularity and gained significant legislative victories. Organizations advocating for English-only policies claimed that national unity was threatened by government policies, like the Bilingual Education Act, that embraced multiculturalism and language plurality in the public sphere. Moreover, movement elites wrapped their claims in paternalistic rhetoric about the educational and occupational advancement of immigrants, claiming that our current system “coddled” non-English speaking immigrants and delayed their economic, cultural, and political incorporation. While many Americans undoubtedly viewed this framing as a shroud for other political or economic motives, public opinion showed that the majority of Americans were attracted to the movement’s claims.

Although my strategy in this paper has been to explain why voting was higher in some counties than others, my analysis does suggest an explanation for why English-only laws have been so popular across the board. By considering both status- and class-based explanations for voting outcomes, I identified two types of settings in which the particular framing of the English-only movement is likely to resonate, one characterized by economic prosperity and political conservatism, the other characterized by economic hardship and an upwardly mobile immigrant population. Because the paternalistic framing appealed to Americans at both ends of the income distribution—although for
different reasons—the movement was able to draw in a large proportion of the polity with the same rhetorical strategy. By calling attention to the problem of immigrants’ inability or unwillingness to learn English—a problem which, by objective measures, did not exist—the movement cast immigrants as undeserving of economic and political inclusion. This was indeed a powerful indictment. It simultaneously appealed to those who were tired of paying for government-funding social services and to those whose power in the labor market would be increased if immigrants were excluded based on their perceived indolence or educational inability.

Results of my analysis also have implications for the way scholars understand how status motivates political action. The dominant theories characterize status movements as “symbolic” reactions to declining cultural values that are largely disconnected from economic interests. Indeed, some of the most influential work on the English-only movement has explained the movement’s success in terms of a nationalist reaction to threatened cultural symbols—most importantly, our common English language—brought on by multiculturalism (Citrin et al 1990). But the case of Proposition 227 seems to more closely follow McVeigh’s (2009) view that status-based power is determined by the logic of supply and demand, and that status is intricately connected to political and economic interests. Cherished cultural customs are certainly important, but they are more likely to produce a nativist response when they are becoming more common in society at large than when they are declining.

Finally, these findings also support the work of scholars who have identified enduring forms of racism and nativism that are common in middle class, well-educated America but are disguised in “colorblind” ideologies (Bonilla Silva 2006). Hiding anti-
immigrant sentiments behind concepts like fiscal responsibility reproduces racial and ethnic inequalities in a way that does not appear to be overtly racist. As I have argued above, by constructing a social problem that stigmatizes immigrants as unworthy of inclusion, both corporate CEO’s and wage-laborers, the educationally enlightened and high school dropouts, can all publicly endorse the same policies promoted by the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, but they can do so under the guise of liberal democracy instead of right-wing extremism.


