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Official English: Myths vs. Reality

Myth: At the Constitutional Convention, the Founding Fathers debated and decided against making English the official language.

Reality: The issue was never discussed at the Constitutional Convention¹. Because more than 90 percent of the non-slave population was of British ancestry², and even the former Dutch colonies had been under English rule for more than a century, the topic was not controversial enough to even be debated.

Myth: A proposal in Congress to make German the official language of the United States failed by one vote.

Reality: Congress never voted on a proposal to make German the official language³. The myth is probably based on a 1794 proposal to translate some laws into German. It was defeated in the House of Representatives, 42 – 41⁴.

Myth: The fact that *The Federalist Papers* were printed in German shows that the Founding Fathers opposed making English the official language of government.

Reality: *The Federalist Papers* were not government documents; they were a series of newspaper columns⁵. Official English applies only to government documents. Furthermore, in *The Federalist No. 2*, John Jay mentions his pleasure that this country had “one united people... speaking the same language.”

Myth: Official English adds more intrusive laws and regulations at a time when the public wants less government.

Reality: Official English does not restrict the rights of private citizens in any way. Instead, it states that the government does not have an inherent responsibility to provide services in languages other than English.

Myth: Official English would deprive criminal defendants of their right to an interpreter.

Reality: Any bill sponsored by U.S. English would provide a specific exception for “actions that protect the rights of... criminal defendants.”

Myth: A 911 interpreter would violate Official English.

Reality: Any bill sponsored by U.S. English would provide a specific exception for “actions... that protect the public health.”

Myth: Official English would bar non-native celebrations such as St. Patrick’s Day, Cinco de Mayo and Oktoberfest.

Reality: Official English refers solely to business conducted by government entities, with specific exemptions for mottoes, holiday celebrations and the like. Not only would non-native holidays continue to be celebrated after the enactment of Official English; but these special days would likely be joined by other cultural festivities taught to Americans by newcomers speaking a shared language—English.

Myth: Official English would prohibit the teaching of foreign languages in schools.

Reality: As it deals with only government entities, publications and documents, the enactment of Official English would not affect the teaching of foreign languages. U.S. English wholeheartedly encourages the teaching of foreign languages at every level of education. Proficiency in multiple languages opens more doors and raises incomes even higher than proficiency in a single language alone.

Myth: Official English would ban the speaking of languages other than English in homes and places of worship.

Reality: While a common language allows us easy access to medical care and government services, the ability to be free in our own homes and places of worship is a right that would not be infringed upon by Official English. While learning English allows all Americans a shot at the American dream, Official English refers to actions taken by the government, proudly maintaining the prized freedom of speech and freedom of religion offered by our Constitution.

Myth: Most nations have not declared an official language.

Reality: More than 90 percent (177) of the world's nations have enacted an official language. English is the most common official language on Earth.

Myth: Most immigrants oppose Official English legislation.

Reality: Over the last two decades, support for Official English and the end to bilingual education has been noticeable among immigrants. In some cases, support for these initiatives has been higher among the foreign born than the population as a whole. Immigrants themselves have cited language as the greatest barrier that keeps them from succeeding in the United States. Several independent surveys have found support for Official English legislation to cover between two-thirds and four-fifths of the foreign born population.

Citations:

1. According to Dr. Christopher Collier, Professor of American History at the University of Connecticut and co-author of *Decision in Philadelphia: The Constitutional Convention of 1787*.
2. United States Bureau of the Census. 1909. *A Century of Population Growth: From the First Census of the United States to the Twelfth, 1790-1900*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.
3. Pochmann, Henry A. 1957. *German Culture in America, 1600-1900*. Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press.
4. Werner, W.L. "German the National Language," *American Notes and Queries*, July 1942, p. 64; and "The Official German Language Legend," *American Speech*, Dec. 1942, p. 246.
5. Fairfield, Roy P., ed. 1991. *The Federalist Papers*. Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press. p. 307.