

Are Immigration Preferences for English-Speakers Racist?

As many as 1.9 billion people, one-third of humanity, have some knowledge of the English language, and most of these people are non-whites in developing countries. Therefore, claims that English-language preferences or requirements for immigration to the United States would be racially discriminatory are unfounded.

Although knowledge of the English language is generally required for naturalization, it has not heretofore been considered for purposes of immigration to the United States. Certain unsuccessful Senate proposals in the late 1980s to establish a “point system” to evaluate prospective immigrants based on various characteristics would have rewarded applicants who spoke English. Applicants who could understand and communicate in English would have been awarded 20 points out of a total of 100, under the legislation introduced by Sens. Edward Kennedy (D-MA) and Alan Simpson (R-WY). At the time, the measure was denounced, especially by Hispanic groups, as racially discriminatory.

This year, Rep. Charles Canady (R-FL) introduced a successful amendment to the immigration bill in the House of Representatives (HR 2202) to require immigrants entering under the diversity program or the various employment-based preference categories to know English. (Despite enjoying the support of House Speaker Newt Gingrich, the provision was later removed when the House voted to strike all sections of the bill dealing with legal immigration.)

The original immigration bill in the Senate also contained a limited English-language requirement, for foreign health-care workers and for certain employment-based categories. The requirement for the employment-based categories was removed in the Judiciary Committee markup, but the requirement for health-care workers remains in the bill the full Senate will consider.

Critics during the House debate again claimed that an English-language requirement for immigration to the United States would discriminate against non-whites. Rep. Xavier Becerra (D-CA), for instance, said during debate on the House floor that “we have an amendment on immigration that would give a preference to a certain group of people.” Robert Underwood, the non-voting delegate from Guam, was more explicit, saying the amendment was “a back-door attempt that introduces an ethnic element into the discussion of immigration policy.”

Whatever the merits of an English-language test for immigration, and whatever the fate of the legislation moving through Congress, it is worthwhile to ask whether critics' claims are true: Would a preference for English-speakers result in discrimination against potential immigrants from developing countries?

At first glance, it seems plausible; after all, most *native* speakers of English are white, even outside the United States. But upon closer examination the claim is clearly unfounded, for two reasons, one logical, the other practical.

First, and most obviously, knowledge of a language is an acquired, not an inherent, characteristic — anyone can learn English, regardless of nationality or skin color. After all, immigrants already in the United States who don't speak English are lining up for classes, confident that learning English will improve their prospects. And millions of newcomers have indeed mastered English as a second language, their children often growing up not speaking the language of the old country at all.

Second, an English-language immigration preference would not be racially discriminatory because most speakers of English overseas, especially those who use it as a second or foreign language, are not white. If the same question were posed about, say, Basque or Amharic or Khmer, one could plausibly claim that the intention was to benefit members of certain ethnic groups, because there are so few speakers of these languages beyond the ethnic boundaries of their native speakers.

But such a claim with regard to English is untenable, given that it has become the most widely used language in human history. English is the main language of books, newspapers, airports and air-traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, diplomacy, sport, international competitions, pop music and advertising. Half of Europe's business deals are conducted in English while more than two-thirds of the world's scientists read in English. Three-quarters of the world's mail is written in English and 80 percent of the world's electronically stored information is in English. And this is a phenomenon that is likely to continue as the world is networked by computers — of the estimated 40 million users of the Internet, the majority communicate in English.

Exactly how many people speak English overseas? This is a notoriously difficult question to answer because, when looking beyond native speakers, there are varying degrees of fluency, as well as pidgin and creole forms of English. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, there are believed to have been between 5 and 7 million speakers of English, out of 500 million or so people in the world. Estimates for today range from 1.1 billion to 1.9 billion people who use English in some capacity, accounting for between one-fifth and one-third of humanity.

The British Council, the United Kingdom's principal agency for cultural relations with other countries, estimates that one out of five people speaks English at some level of competence. In addition to the roughly 350 million people for whom English is a first language, another 350 million use it regularly as a second language and a further 100 million speak it fluently as a foreign language. The language is used in over 70 countries as an official or semi-official language and has important status in over 20 more, with more than 1.4 billion people living in countries where English has official status. The Council estimates that by the year 2000 more than one billion people will be learning English.

Estimates by Braj B. Kachru, a professor at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, and a leading expert in the field of world English, are even higher: he concludes that for each native speaker of English, there are four non-native speakers using the language in various ways around the world, for a total of nearly 2 billion people.

If as much as one-third of the human race has some grasp of English, selecting immigrants partly based on their command of the language can hardly be a prescription for racial discrimination.

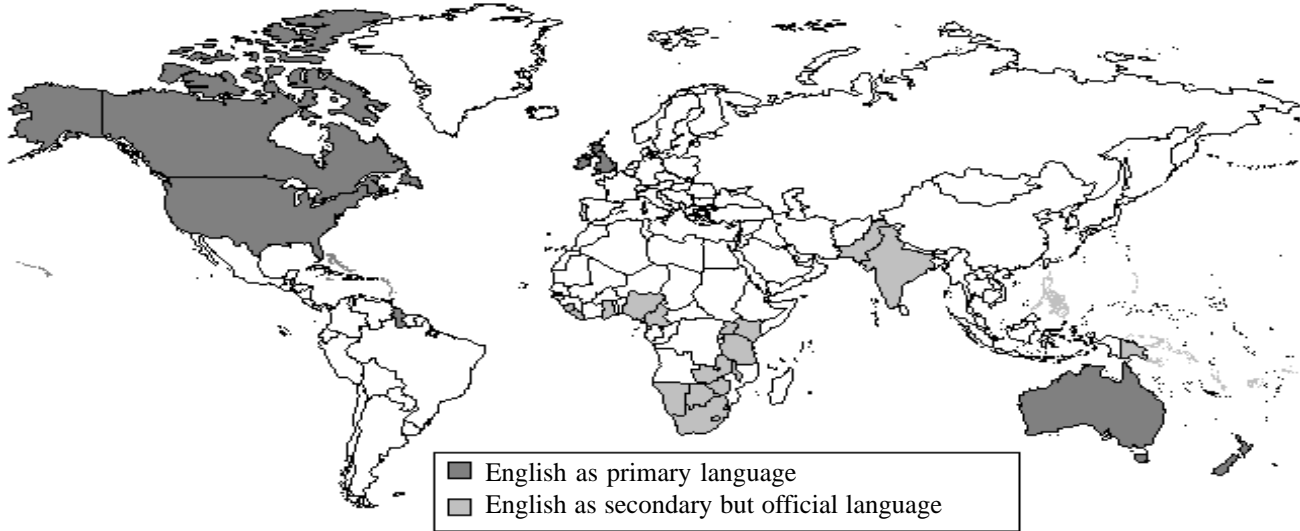
It is true that English is less widespread in Latin America than in some other parts of the world, but, as Table 1 shows, the majority of the world's English-speakers are in the developing world. Hispanic lobbying groups' opposition to an English-language preference would therefore appear to stem less from concern about "racism" than from fears that the Latin American share of immigrants to the United States might decline, while the proportion of immigrants from Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Europe might increase. But as Table 1 also shows, even in Latin America there are millions of English-speakers.

Estimates of the number of English-speakers in any given country can vary wildly. An extreme example is Kenya (see Table 1). The lowest estimate, admitted as conservative by its author, Prof. Kachru, is 714,000, calculated as four percent of the country's population in 1985. The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language estimates English-speakers in Kenya to constitute 9 percent of the population of 25 million, or about 2.24 million people, while the BBC World Service estimates 3.4 million adult English speakers there. And a spokesman at the Kenyan embassy in Washington recently estimated that 80 percent of the nation's 23 million population knows at least some English, which would mean 18.4 million people.

To better understand the use of English in different countries, Prof. Kachru has conceived the idea of three concentric circles of English, only one of which is predominantly white (see Figure 1). The "**inner circle**" represents the traditional bases of English, and most speakers are white: the United Kingdom (the long-ago-overshadowed cradle of our language), the United States, English Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and some of the Caribbean islands. The total number of English speakers in the inner circle is as high as 380 million, of whom some 120 million are outside the United States. In Figure 2, these countries are shaded dark gray.

Next comes the "**outer circle**," which includes countries where English is not the native tongue, but is important for historical reasons and plays a part in the nation's institutions, either as an official language or otherwise. This circle includes India, Nigeria, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Malaysia, South Africa (though there are also many native speakers there), Tanzania, Kenya, etc. The total number of English speakers in the outer circle is estimated to range from 150 million to 300 million. Virtually all these people are non-white. In Figure 2, the countries where English is not native but is an official language are shaded light gray.

Figure 2: The Status of English



Finally, the “**expanding circle**” encompasses those countries where English plays no historical or governmental role, but where it is nevertheless widely used as a foreign language. This includes China, Russia, Japan, western Europe, Korea, Egypt, Indonesia, etc. The total in this expanding circle is the most difficult to estimate, especially because English may be employed for specific, limited purposes. But the estimates range from 100 million to 1 billion. Here too, the majority is non-white.

Even current immigration statistics suggest that an English-language preference would probably benefit non-whites from developing countries more than white native speakers of English. In 1995, for example, 150,000 of that year's roughly 720,000 immigrants came from nations in the “outer circle,” Third-World countries where English is an official language or plays some other major role. Nations in Prof. Kachru's “inner circle” accounted for a little more than 33,000 immigrants in that year.

It is clear, then, that giving preference for immigration to applicants who know the English language would be racially discriminatory neither in theory nor in practice. There may be other reasons to oppose such a measure, but fear of a back-door return to a national-origins-based immigration system cannot be among them.

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Table 1: English Speakers Around the World

Country	# of English Speakers	Country	# of English Speakers	Country	# of English Speakers	Country	# of English Speakers
Algeria	1million	Ethiopia	25-4mil.	Lesotho	.16million	Senegal	.12million
Angola	3million	Fiji	4million	Liberia	25million	Serbia	12million
Argentina	35million	Finland	8million	Macau	.1million	Sierra Leone	.6-39mil.
Austria	15million	France	119mil.	Madagascar	1.1million	Singapore	1.1-1.9mil.
Bangladesh	38-8.1mil.	Gambia	.12million	Malawi	.75million	Slovakia	.16million
Belgium	21million	Germany	28.1mil.	Malaysia	4-58mil.	Slovenia	43million
Benin	24million	Ghana	1-3million	Malta	25million	Somalia	26million
Botswana	.1-1million	Guatemala	24million	Micronesia	.1million	South Africa	53-30mil.
Brazil	9million	Guyana	9million	Morocco	29million	Spain	4.1million
Bulgaria	1.6million	Haiti	3million	Mozambique	.77million	Sri Lanka	.7-2.6mil.
Burkina Faso	25million	Honduras	.1million	Nepal	.6-4.7mil.	Sweden	4.1million
Burundi	.53million	Hong Kong	1-4.2mil.	Netherlands	8.2million	Switzerland	14million
Cameroon	1.1-6mil.	Hungary	.6million	Niger	1.1million	Tanzania	28-3.7mil.
Other Carib.	1.7-2.3mil.	India	28-139mil.	Nigeria	3.6-44.3mil.	Thailand	5.7million
Chile	.5million	Indonesia	10.6mil.	Norway	2.7million	Trin. & Tob.	.6-1.2mil.
China	13-200mil.	Israel	2million	Pakistan	2.5-13.2mil.	Turkey	2.3million
Colombia	5.8million	Italy	2.9million	P.-N. Guinea	2.4million	Uganda	5.2million
Croatia	.64million	Ivory Coast	.66million	Phillipines	30.7-50mil.	Venezuela	1.8-2mil.
Cyprus	.28million	Jamaica	1.6-2.3mil.	Poland	1.4million	W. Samoa	.1million
Czech Rep.	.5million	Japan	12.3million	Portugal	1.3million	Yemen	9million
Denmark	2.2million	Jordan	1.4mil.	Puerto Rico	1.5million	Zaire	1.1million
Egypt	2.2million	Kenya	.7-18.4mil.	Romania	1.1million	Zambia	9-2million
El Salvador	1.9million	Korea (S.)	14.7million	Russia	5.8million	Zimbabwe	1.9-3mil.
Estonia	.1million	Lebanon	1.1million	Saudi Arabia	2.9million		

Sources: BBC World Service; *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*; embassy staff estimates; Crystal (1985); Kachru (1985).

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The Center for Immigration Studies is a non-profit, non-partisan research institution which examines the impact of immigration on the United States.