

**Politics and the English Language in California:
Bilingual Education at the Polls¹**

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Abstract

By a large margin, Californians passed the English Proficiency, Multilingual Education Initiative in November 2016, despite the fact that Proposition 58 gutted Proposition 227, which effectively ended bilingual education in 1998. We conclude that it would be simplistic to call this massive change in policy a result that the “times had changed,” either demographically or even in terms of underlying attitudes toward language. Instead, the victory of Prop 58 seems due in large part to political strategy rather than a radical shift in the electorate. The proportions of Latino and Asian registered voters have certainly increased over the last decade and a half, as has the proportion of liberal Democrats. Nevertheless, there is a limit to what these demography-as-destiny accounts can explain. Instead, using survey experiments in three California-wide surveys, we show that underlying attitudes about teaching the English language have been relatively stable, and that many voters supported Prop 58 without being aware that it reinstated bilingual education. When this was made clear, voters changed their positions, particularly among whites and conservatives. What was salient were the first two words on the ballot label, “English Proficiency” and this is an almost universally accepted goal.

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Introduction

In November 2016, California voters restored bilingual education in the state's public schools by passing Proposition 58, the English Proficiency, Multilingual Initiative Statute. Prop. 58 won by the impressive margin of 74 to 26 percent, receiving more votes than any of the 17 other statewide initiatives on the ballot.

The overwhelming victory of Prop. 58 is astounding given the recent history of language politics in California. It explicitly repealed key provisions of Proposition 227, the English Language in Public Schools Initiative Statute, which had passed only 16 years earlier, in 1998, with 61 percent of the vote. Proposition 227 stated that all public school instruction be conducted in English, with mandated English immersion for non-English speaking students after just one year. Proposition 58 eliminated this provision and the requirement that parents had to seek a waiver to opt out of English-only programs. It allowed for dual immersion instruction on an ongoing basis, and it also allowed for further changes in the new law to be made by the legislature alone. In contrast, as far back as 1986, California passed the English as Official Language initiative. Decades of polling show that Californians, like Americans elsewhere, consistently agree that speaking English is very important for making one a "true American" (Citrin, Reingold, Walters, and Green 1990; Citrin, Reingold, and Green 1990; Citrin, Wong, and Duff, 2001)?

How did California ostensibly change from being on the forefront of the "Official English" movement to being a leader in bilingual education? Media accounts of Prop. 58's passage touted a sea change in the state's politics, driven by migration and changing norms. A postelection KQED report asserted that "The significance of this initiative underscores the changing demographics and cultural shifts in the Golden State."² Or in the *SF Chronicle's* pithy assessment, "times have changed."³

These factors surely contributed to the outcome. According to the census bureau's current population survey, Hispanics and Asians, the main presumed beneficiaries of bilingual education, accounted for 21 percent and 12 percent, respectively, of the state's registered voters in 2014, up from 14 percent and 7 percent in 1998. Data based on the registered voters file show that of the 19 million Californians who voted in the 2016 general election, 62 percent were white, 4 percent were African American, 25 percent were Latino, and 9 percent Asian. We know that Latino voters have consistently been more in favor of bilingual policies and more opposed to enshrining the hegemony of English in law (Citrin, Reingold, Walters, and Green 1990). This was demonstrated in the vote on Proposition 227. *Los Angeles Times* exit polls showed that 63 percent of whites supported the measure, compared to 48 percent of blacks, 57 percent of Asians, and only 37 percent of Latinos (Campbell, Wong, and Citrin 2006). The size of the bloc most opposed to Proposition 227 has grown substantially, so even if opinions may not have changed at the individual or group level there would have been a basis for more support for Proposition 58.

California has also become a much more liberal, Democratic state in the past 20 years, in part because Latinos abandoned the Republicans after the passage of Proposition 187 in 1994 and in part due to domestic migration. According to the California secretary of state, the Democratic share of registered voters remained at 45 percent between 2000 and 2016 while the Republican share fell from 35 to 26 percent. The largest gain—11 to 24 percent—was among those register-

² See <https://ww2.kqed.org/news/2016/11/08/voters-embrace-bilingual-education-in-prop-58-victory/>.

³ <http://www.sfgate.com/politics/article/Election-results-California-ballot-measures-10601773.php>.

ing as “No Party Preference,” but this group tends to be liberal, and for almost a decade Democrats have held every statewide elected office. Since Democrats and liberals were more likely to oppose Proposition 227 and favor bilingual education, the decline in the Republican share of the electorate could also have contributed to the changed outcome regardless of shifts in individual or group opinion.

But there are limits to what these demography-as-destiny accounts can explain. To illustrate: if we make a heroic assumption that the distribution of opinion within ethnic groups remained the same between 1998 and 2016 and simulated an outcome based on the 2016 turnout figures, opposition to Proposition 227 would have increased from 39 to 43 percent; this is a noticeable change, but not nearly enough to explain the outcome of Proposition 58. If we conduct a similar simulation by preserving the same distribution of support for Proposition 227 across party identifiers and using the 2016 turnout figures by party, the proportion of those opposed to Unz’s measure rises to 42 percent. Again, there is a change, but one too small to explain the vote in favor of Prop. 58.

A competing explanation is that a tidal change in opinion has occurred, an instance of a period effect in which all groups moved quite in the same direction, albeit not at the same rate. Several recent examples come to mind: the decline in trust in government beginning in the late 1960s (Citrin and Green 1986); the erosion of belief in racial segregation and “old-fashioned” racism between 1960 and 1990 (Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, and Krysan 1998), and the rapid growth in acceptance of gay marriage (Fiorina and Abrams 2012). Perhaps the onward march of globalization, ethnic intergroup contact, and developments in popular culture made all Californians more favorable to the benefits of bilingual education, and these combined with demographic change could help explain the central question of this paper.

Without discounting these “structural” factors, we shall give greater weight to the nature of the campaigns for Propositions 227 and 58. Here we examine how the initiatives were framed, the line-up of endorsers and opponents, and spending and advertising both for and against. Using a series of polls of California registered voters that included survey experiments, we show that underlying opinions about the primacy of English have not changed and that overall opinion about bilingual education has been quite stable over the past decades. Many voters supported Proposition 58 without being aware that it repealed the core of Proposition 227, although this was stated explicitly in the language of the statute published in the ballot pamphlet. When respondents were told this in a survey experiment, their opinions shifted strongly away from support for Prop. 58. What seemed to be salient to voters were the first two words on the ballot label, “English Proficiency,” and this may account for the surprising fact that whites voted overwhelmingly for both Prop. 227 and its repeal by Prop. 58. In a context of political ignorance, if how initiatives are labeled has a significant effect on the vote, then the decision of how to name a measure deserves greater scrutiny.

Background

Proposition 227 was the brainchild of Ron Unz, a successful Silicon Valley entrepreneur. By his own account (Unz 2016), he was inspired by a *Los Angeles Times* story about a group of Latino immigrant parents who began a public protest against their local elementary school “for refusing to teach their children English.” Unz then bankrolled an “English for the Children” initiative campaign, and it was placed on the ballot in June 1998. Aside from outgoing Governor Pete Wilson, all leading politicians, including the gubernatorial candidates, opposed this measure to

eliminate almost all bilingual education. The interest groups—business and labor, led by the California Teachers Association—lined up in opposition, as did all the leading California newspapers. The opposition outspent supporters of Proposition 227 by \$3.3 million to \$1.2 million. Nevertheless, Field Polls from November 1997 to late May 1998 showed strong support, with some decline toward the end of the campaign. Proposition 227, characterized as “English for the Children” won by 61 percent to 39 percent of the overall vote.

Proposition 227 did succeed in eliminating bilingual education programs from the vast majority of the state’s public schools. Did it succeed in speeding the learning of English? Within four years, the English academic test scores of more than one million immigrant children had greatly improved, although analysts disagree about how much of this was due to the immersion program mandated by Proposition 227 as opposed to other coterminous factors. An academic meta-analysis (McCloskey, Pellegrin, Thompson, and Hakuta 2008) focused on middle schoolers and found mixed results. Both English learners and students who already spoke English improved in their test scores, but there was no systematic evidence that the Proposition 227 reforms speeded learning in each class.

Still, following the passage of 227, debate over bilingual education at the mass level receded despite ongoing support from some education organizations and activists. What did change in California politics after the passage of Proposition 227, due to term limits, immigration, and re-districting, was the greatly increased presence of Latino legislators in California. The Latino caucus grew, and Democratic gains left them with nearly a two-thirds majority in both chambers. Indeed, in 2016, both the speaker of the state Assembly and the president pro tem of the state Senate were Latinos from southern California.

Senator Ricardo Lara was the sponsor of SB 1174, a law passed in 2014 and placed on the ballot in 2016. (Since Proposition 227 was a statute initiative rather than a constitutional amendment, California law allowed the legislature, with the governor’s concurrence, to place an amended law on the ballot without collecting signatures.) Lara argued that there was no evidence that Proposition 227 had improved learning English, but rather that it had prevented parents from helping their children retain their native language, which would be an asset in a global economy (Asimov 2016). Proposition 227 imposed a one-size-fits-all approach, he said, mentioning that while he had done well in an English immersion program, two of his siblings had not. Under Proposition 58, schools could decide how to educate English learners, and parents could choose. In addition, dual-immersion programs that were increasingly popular among upper-educated voters could be implemented. In principle, then, there could be no time limit on bilingual education.

Proposition 58 was endorsed by all the major interest groups and newspapers, with the SEIU a particularly strong sponsor. Unz emerged as the leading, indeed almost the only, vocal opponent of Proposition 58. He entered the Republican senatorial race on the single issue of “English First.” He did not, however, fund an opposition campaign. Indeed the pro-58 campaign raised \$5,660,313 from 179 contributions averaging more than \$30,000 each while the “No” side raised nothing at all!⁴ Even so, the public campaign for reform was largely under the radar, confined in English language outlets to radio ads of bilingual students asking for the opportunity to learn more than one language to help them get ahead. Unz’s response was that the title of Proposition 58 was a trick designed to deceive voters that it assured English language instruction, even though it was designed to allow for bilingual or Spanish-only education against the wishes of parents (Unz 2016.) Whatever the truth of this claim, Proposition 58 triumphed easily.

⁴ <http://powersearch.sos.ca.gov/advanced.php>.

Public Opinion on Bilingual Education

The federal Bilingual Education Act of 1968 mandated bilingual instruction in districts where a significant number of children were “English learners.” How they should be taught became controversial with debates over the effectiveness of different approaches and the value and legitimacy of using bilingual education as a means of “cultural maintenance” (i.e., helping immigrant minorities retain their original language and customs). Thus, there is both a pragmatic and symbolic dimension to language policy. On the pragmatic level, the issue is how limited-English speakers learn English most effectively, with little disagreement that in modern America one needs to be able to speak English in order to get ahead. At the symbolic level, critics of bilingual education, and the cultural maintenance model in particular, argue that English is a significant basis of a common American nationality and a necessary component for developing mutuality among diverse groups. Opponents of the English-only or “English first” mentality argue that it undermines pluralism, reflects an intolerance of minorities, and prevents people from expressing their ethnic identity.

The dual themes in the elite debate over bilingual education—pragmatism and symbolism—elicit different responses in public opinion. When bilingual education is framed as a device to speed learning English, it receives public support, but when it is regarded as undercutting the status of English as the country’s common language, the majority is strongly opposed (Citrin and Pearson 2002, Huddy and Sears 1990). Yet despite widespread public reservations about its purposes and effectiveness, bilingual-education programs remained well established throughout California and the rest of the country until the 1990s.

When asked a simple question, “do you approve of bilingual education,” a large majority of the public is in favor (Huddy and Sears 1990). However, this consensus dissolves when one probes about specific variants of bilingual education. Using national survey data from around the time Proposition 227 and related initiatives were on state ballots (the 2000 General Social Survey), researchers found the public was divided about whether to eliminate bilingual education; agreement was boosted by stronger support for assimilation, as measured by agreement that “ethnic and racial minority groups in America should blend into the mainstream” (Citrin and Pearson 2002). A *Washington Post*, Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University 1999 National Latino Survey asked both a representative national sample and a separate sample of Latinos whether they thought that “all public school classes should be conducted in English or that children of immigrants could take some classes in their native language.” A majority of Latinos (59 percent) believed that the option for some classes in a native language should be available; in contrast, only 39 percent of the national sample showed similar support.

The Los Angeles County Social Surveys, conducted in 2000 and 2002 soon after the passage of Proposition 227, also asked about support for different ways for students to learn English. As in other surveys, white-Hispanic differences were manifest. Among whites, 41 percent opted for complete “immersion” and another 40 percent preferred allowing teaching in a student’s native language for up to a year. Only four percent favored the cultural maintenance alternative. Among Hispanics, however, total immersion was supported by just 28 percent, and support for bilingual education of a transitional nature was the modal choice of 63 percent (Citrin and Pearson 2002, Table 6).

More generally, both national and California polls show a strong majority in favor of the importance of learning English and only a small minority of less than 20 percent favoring the “cultural maintenance” option. Bilingual education as a transition and English immersion receive

similar overall levels of support, with the distributions fluctuating from poll to poll, but transitional programs on balance are more popular.

These data provide a backdrop to the campaign for Proposition 58. This paper analyzes the underpinnings of support, using an IGS Survey conducted in June 2016 and IGS/Field Poll surveys conducted in September and October 2016. All three surveys sampled registered voters and were conducted by internet. The IGS Survey had a sample size of 3,044, with 2056 being asked the question about Proposition 58. All interviews were conducted in English. The September and October 2016 polls each sampled 1,800 respondents with interviews conducted in both English and Spanish. In the September poll, all respondents were asked a question about Proposition 58; in the October poll due to split-sampling, the question was asked of 1,200 respondents.

Public Opinion and Proposition 58

We find little evidence that Proposition 58 succeeded because Californians have come to embrace a strongly multiculturalist vision of education or language policy. Studies 1 and 3 asked similar versions of a question used in prior research on public opinion about bilingual-education policy that offers respondents three alternatives: an “English-only” option that requires public schools to instruct students only in English, a “Transition” option that allows instruction in English learners’ native languages for up to a year as they get settled in, and a “Cultural Maintenance” option that permits students to take some classes in their native languages throughout their K-12 educations.

As Table 1 shows, the polls differ on whether English-only or transition is the modal preference, but both show far greater support for those options than cultural maintenance. Whereas almost three in four California voters backed the repeal of Proposition 227, both studies indicate that less than one in four in fact want public schools in the state to allow students to take classes in their native languages all the way through high school. These results are roughly consistent with earlier polling in California, indicating that the stunning change in bilingual education’s electoral fortunes does not reflect a sea change in public opinion on the subject.

Maintenance finishes third among all racial and ethnic groups except Hispanics, where support hovers between a quarter and a third of the Hispanics in the samples. Notably, it fares only marginally better among surveyed Asians than whites. Across respondents from all four of the largest racial categories, support for transition was noticeably higher in the first poll than the second, which was conducted about four months later. We are unsure whether this reflects minor differences in question wording, a campaign effect, or differences in the composition of the samples.

However, there are indications that cultural maintenance may be gaining support while English-only mandates become less popular. Both studies show that younger Californians are more than twice as supportive of maintenance than are the elderly and substantially less supportive of English-only. Nevertheless, these patterns do not necessarily reflect the emergence of a young, highly educated multiculturalist “vanguard” (Citrin and Sears 2014), since respondents with a college degree were no more supportive than those without one of the maintenance form of bilingual education.

The two studies furnish conflicting evidence about whether age or ethnicity is the critical determinant of language-policy opinions. Study 1 suggests that ethnicity matters a great deal and may come to matter more in the future. Latinos and Asians 60 years old and above rejected cultural maintenance at rates even higher than elderly whites. However, whereas young Latinos and

Table 1. Support for Bilingual Education Programs, by Race, Age, and Education

	<i>Study 1</i>					<i>Study 3</i>				
	<i>Eng. Only</i>	<i>Trans.</i>	<i>Maint.</i>	<i>Not Sure</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Eng. Only</i>	<i>Trans.</i>	<i>Maint.</i>	<i>Not Sure</i>	<i>N</i>
Race										
White	43	42	11	4	534	41	35	19	4	1,030
Black	24	38	19	19	37	35	30	27	8	129
Hispanic	25	45	26	5	245	34	33	30	4	457
Asian	34	44	17	5	176	40	30	21	10	127
Other	38	38	21	2	42	41	39	14	6	56
Age										
35-	28	43	24	5	380	28	36	32	5	448
36-59	40	42	13	4	368	40	34	21	5	743
60+	41	44	10	5	299	47	33	15	5	608
Education										
HS or less	33	40	22	4	94	47	25	21	7	328
Some College	34	44	17	5	244	36	35	25	4	721
College Degree+	36	45	14	5	605	38	37	21	4	750
Total	36	43	16	5	1,047	39	34	22	5	1,799

Asians were much more supportive of cultural maintenance than elderly ones, whites’ opinions did not vary by age cohort. Specifically, among whites in Study 1, a virtually identical 11 percent of those 35 and under and 60 and older opted for cultural maintenance. Among Latinos, however, support was as high as 35 percent among the youngest cohort (N=148) but only 15 percent among the middle cohort (N=69), and a mere 4 percent among Latinos 60 and older (N=28). Among Asians, the respective figures followed a similar pattern: 23 percent among the young (N=70), 16 percent among the middle bracket (N=74), and 6 percent among the elderly (N=32).

However, Study 3 found similar patterns by age among whites and Latinos, and whites and Latinos within each age bracket differed little in their policy preferences (the Asian sample was too small to analyze in this way). Among whites aged 35 and younger in Study 3, 27 percent supported English-only, 39 percent transition, and 31 percent cultural maintenance (N=181). Among Latinos in the youngest age bracket, the respective figures were 29 percent, 36 percent, and 33 percent. Among those 60 and older, the respective figures were 47 percent, 34 percent, and 14 percent (N=439).

Effects of Framing On Support for Prop. 58

As the limited support for cultural maintenance-style bilingual education would suggest, most Californians said they preferred to keep Proposition 227’s key provision requiring that English language learners be taught in only English within a year. However, framing can strongly influence support, with pragmatic economic frames appearing more influential than cultural frames. Without explicitly mentioning Proposition 58 or using the language of the ballot label,

which had not been established at the time, our first study told the two-thirds of respondents who were not given the three-option question the following:

In 1998, California voters approved a law requiring the state's public schools to move students who do not speak English into classes taught only in English after one year. In this November's election, there is a proposal to repeal that law.

They were then given two opposing arguments in random order, one favoring repealing 227 and the other favoring retaining 227. Half of the respondents were randomly assigned to receive an economic argument for repealing 227.

Some people feel that students who are not English speakers should be able to take some classes in their native language through high school because speaking multiple languages is a valuable skill in a globalized economy.

The other half received a cultural argument for repealing it.

Some people feel that students who are not English speakers should be able to take some classes in their native language through high school so they can maintain their own culture and language.

Independent of the particular prorepeal argument they saw, half of respondents were also randomly assigned to receive an economic argument for retaining 227.

Others feel that students who are not English speakers should take classes only in English because being fluent in English is necessary to get good jobs and get ahead.

The other half received a cultural argument for retaining it.

Others feel that students who are not English speakers should take classes only in English so that we can preserve a common American culture and language.

In other words, respondents could have heard two economic arguments, two cultural arguments, or one economic and one cultural argument. All respondents were then asked whether they favored or opposed repealing Proposition 227. The results of this framing experiment are presented in Table 2. No matter which frames respondents saw, there was majority support for retaining Proposition 227. Support for 227 is at its weakest when the argument for keeping it refers to the cultural significance of English as a unifying language and the argument for repeal makes an economic case. It is at its strongest when the rationale for repeal is presented as cultural maintenance. Further inspection (not shown) revealed no significant differences in these patterns of effects by ethnicity, age, partisanship, or gender.

If opposition to cultural maintenance-style bilingual education remains high and voters by and large dislike the idea repealing Prop. 227's key provision, why did Proposition 58 pass with overwhelming support? As Table 3 shows, our second and third studies indicate that the overwhelming support was due to voter confusion about the meaning and framing of Proposition 58's ballot label. Study 2 randomly assigned registered voters to see (1) the Proposition 58 title and ballot label and ask if they would plan to vote for it, or to see (2) a description of Proposition 58 that made reference to the fact (as stated by the legislative analyst on the ballot pamphlet) that Prop. 58 would repeal key provisions of Prop. 227. Half of those who saw the description of Prop. 58 as a repeal of Prop. 227 also received the competing pro and con economic arguments

Table 2. Cultural and Economic Frames Influence Support for Repealing Key Provisions of Prop. 227

	Repeal 227	Keep 227	Not Sure	N
Maintenance vs. Preserve Am. Culture	20.5	66.2	13.3	517
Globalized Economy vs. Preserve Am. Culture	33.5	51.2	15.4	475
Globalized Economy vs. English Fluency	24.2	61.2	14.5	557
Maintenance vs. English Fluency	20.9	65.9	13.2	507
Total	24.6	61.3	14.1	2,056

Table 3. Support for Prop. 58 Overstates Support for Repealing Key Provisions of Prop. 227

	Study 2				Study 3			
	Support	Oppose	Not Sure	N	Support	Oppose	Not Sure	N
Full Sample								
Control	68	13	19	596	69	26	5	1,176
Repeal, No Args	30	49	21	599	---	---	---	---
Repeal Plus Args	38	42	21	600	46	47	7	582
Whites								
Control	70	15	15	336	67	28	4	673
Repeal, No Args	25	53	22	339	---	---	---	---
Repeal Plus Args	32	45	23	332	47	49	5	336
Latinos								
Control	68	10	23	151	71	23	7	301
Repeal, No Args	41	35	24	153	---	---	---	---
Repeal Plus Args	52	35	13	151	51	38	12	141

used in the Study 1 framing experiment, while the other half received no arguments. Study 3 then replicated this experiment but gave everyone who received the Prop. 227 repeal description the competing pro and con arguments. In both studies, nearly 70 percent of voters supported Prop. 58 when given the ballot label description, including—strikingly—roughly equal proportions of whites and Latinos. However, when respondents were instead asked about repealing the English immersion requirement of Prop. 227, support dropped dramatically to 30 percent overall in study 2 among those who received no arguments, 38 percent among those in study 2 who were exposed to arguments, and 46 percent in Study 3, all of whom received arguments. Large white-Latino differences in support also reasserted themselves in these conditions in Study 2, though these differences were appreciably smaller in Study 3, which was conducted at the end of the campaign.

However, Proposition 58 might have *narrowly* passed even if voters had understood that they were repealing Prop. 227, at least if they were armed also with the economic arguments played

up in the public framing of the issue. In Study 2, the dual arguments restored some portion of support for Prop. 58 among whites and Latinos alike. A small plurality of voters overall still preferred retaining Prop. 227, including 45 percent of whites and only 35 percent of Latinos. However, a large number of white voters remained undecided (23 percent), and a bare majority of La-

tinians (52 percent) supported Prop. 58 when it was explained as a repeal of Prop. 227 and they were given economic arguments about bilingual education.

Perhaps due to a one-sided pro-Prop. 58 campaign, Study 3 found even greater support for repealing Prop. 227 among respondents who received economic pro and con arguments (though still far lower than support for Prop. 58 as described by the official ballot label alone, which stood at 69 percent compared to only 26 percent opposed). Support rose from 38 percent to 46 percent overall between Studies 2 and 3 among respondents exposed to the competing arguments, while opposition also rose, but by less (from 42 percent to 47 percent). The number of undecided voters plummeted by two-thirds, virtually all among whites; most of those previously undecided white voters opted to repeal Prop. 227.

Discussion and Conclusion

It is interesting that support for the repeal of Prop. 227, framed in economic terms, increased so much between the second and the third studies, even though support for cultural maintenance (as gauged by the three-option question about bilingual education policy) largely remained the same. One explanation, admittedly speculative, is that the pro-Prop. 58 campaign succeeded in framing a “yes” vote on the initiative as an endorsement of making California competitive in a global economy and a “no” vote as culturally regressive. Why this message should resonate more over time is unclear, although it is possible that voters started paying more attention as election day approached.

Regardless, the results of these studies can teach us several lessons about politics and the English language in California. Despite rapid demographic and cultural change in the state, voters remain largely opposed to multiculturalism as manifested as cultural maintenance via language. Neither racial/ethnic shifts nor changes in partisan dominance in the state are sufficient to explain why California overturned its own earlier vote about bilingual education. In that regard, interpreting the repeal of Prop. 227 as a sign that “demographics is destiny” would be overstated. Californians have not become dramatically more open to “hard” multicultural policies or become far less demanding of assimilation than they once were. However, Californians appear to be quite open to the idea of bilingualism as a practical economic strategy, with many accepting the realities of globalization. The idea that identity politics and claims to cultural distinctiveness and group rights should override the functional necessity of a common language of social and economic intercourse and exchange, though, is a frame that found little support in California in 2016.

Direct democracy rides high in California, with initiatives increasingly a device for making significant changes in policy. This process reached a possible high point in 2016, in part because the very low turnout in the 2014 election lowered the threshold for the number of signatures required to qualify a measure for the ballot. In addition to bilingual education, taxes, the legalization of marijuana, drug pricing, and the death penalty were among high-profile measures confronting voters. Proposition 58, largely unopposed, received little notice. In this low-information context, the availability heuristic arguably has great weight. Here the ballot label looms large and Proposition 58’s first words were “English proficiency.” As we have shown, no one opposes that

goal, which was the stated purpose of Proposition 227 as well. Given the consistent support for the primacy of English among white voters (Citrin and Sears 2014), a plausible interpretation of the results of our survey experiments is that many white voters were simply unaware of the substantive changes effected by Proposition 58 and were recording an opinion unchanged from when the vote on 227 occurred. This interpretation surely accounts for much of the massive change in opinion when respondents were informed that Proposition 58 repealed the elimination of the English immersion requirement of 227.

Proponents of initiatives know full well the significance of the ballot label and attempt to influence the attorney general's decision to obtain an outcome that resonates with positive symbolism. Clearly they were successful in the case of Proposition 58 in providing a simple heuristic for voting for those who avoided reading a lengthy piece of legislation. In the absence of a two-sided campaign, the ballot label is more likely to be used as a short-cut by less-informed voters. And using the label to decide what is in the box may not be the kind of economizing device that produces rationality in the face of ignorance (Lupia, McCubbins, and Popkin 2000)

California has reformed the initiative process to give legislators an opportunity to review and possibly revise ballot propositions. Yet the key decision of how to name an initiative remains untouched and under the control of a partisan official. With Prop. 58, Democrats were helped in the process, but with Prop. 209 (the "civil rights initiative"), one could argue that Republicans were the winners. If there is another look at reshaping direct democracy to help voters make an informed choice, this critical decision might well be handed to a more neutral arbiter to avoid accusations of chicanery from either side.

APPENDIX

Question Wording for Survey Questions Used

Table 1

Study 1

With the country's population changing, there is a lot of talk in the U.S. as a whole and in California about language policy. We'd like you to answer a few questions about these issues. In your opinion, should children who don't speak English when they enter our public schools . . .

- Have to take their classes only in English so that they have to learn English right from the start
- Be able to take classes in their native language for a transitional period of several years until they learn English and then have to take classes in English only
- Be able to take classes in their native language as well as English all the way through high school in order to maintain their native language
- Not Sure

(This question was not asked in Study 2.)

Study 3

With the country's population changing, there is a lot of talk in the U.S. as a whole and in California about language policy. We'd like you to answer a few questions about these issues.

In your opinion, should children who don't speak English when they enter our public schools . . .

- Have to take their classes in English only so that they must learn English right from the start.
- Be able to take classes in their native language for a transitional period until they learn English and then have to take classes in English only.
- Be able to take classes in their native language as well as English through high school in order to be fluent in both English and their native language.
- Not Sure

Table 2: Wording Provided In Text

Table 3

Ballot Label

Proposition 58: ENGLISH PROFICIENCY. MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION. INITIATIVE STATUTE. Preserves requirement that public schools ensure students obtain English language proficiency. Requires school districts to solicit parent/community input in developing language acquisition programs. Requires instruction to ensure English acquisition as rapidly and effectively as possible. Authorizes school districts to establish dual-language immersion programs for both native and non-native English speakers. Fiscal Impact: No notable fiscal effect on school districts or state government.

How will you vote on Proposition 58?

Repeal, No Arguments

In 1998 California voters passed Proposition 227, requiring the state's public schools to move most students who are English learners into classes taught only in English after one year. Proposition 58, the English Proficiency and Multilingual Education measure on the November election ballot would repeal that part of Proposition 227 and would allow students to take some classes in their native language other than English throughout high school.

How will you vote on Proposition 58?

Repeal + Arguments

In 1998 California voters passed Proposition 227, requiring the state's public schools to move most students who are learning English into classes taught only in English after one year. Proposition 58 on the November ballot, the English proficiency, multilingual education measure, would repeal that part of Proposition 227 and could allow students to take some classes in their native language rather than English throughout high school.

(Randomize display order of next two paragraphs)

- Opponents of Proposition 58 say that students who are not good English speakers should take classes only in English as soon as possible because being fluent in English is necessary to get good jobs and get ahead.
- Supporters of Proposition 58 say that schools and parents should be able to implement ongoing bilingual education programs because speaking several languages is a valuable skill in a globalized economy.

If the election were being held today, how would you vote on Proposition 58?

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