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Plus ça Change ... *

American tolerance of linguistic diversity seems to have come a long way in a short time – at least, judging by the behavior of American politicians. As recently as 1996, the Republican Party platform included an English-only plank. Its presidential nominee, Bob Dole (1995: 5), cited bilingualism as one of ‘the divisive forces tearing at our country,’ arguing that ‘we need the glue of language to help hold us together. ... English should be acknowledged once and for all as the official language of the United States.’

This year, by contrast, virtually all of the presidential contenders, along with many candidates for lower office, have made efforts to speak Spanish on the campaign trail. Virtually nobody has complained, except for those who have been subjected to their solecisms.

The Democrats’ early front-runner, Howard Dean, drew laughter from a Latino audience when denouncing what President Bush had done to ‘*nosotros ingresos*’ (us incomes). Another also-ran, Joe Lieberman, caused merriment by mixing Spanish with Yiddish: ‘*Viva chutzpah!*’ Fortunately, neither followed the example of a Texas Congressman on a visit to Mexico, who announced: ‘*Estoy embarazada*’ (I’m pregnant). Meanwhile, George W. Bush, who led Republicans down the same path in 2000, has continued to abuse the Spanish language and the English language with equal aplomb.

Whether they applaud this trend or not, Anglo-Americans are beginning to recognize that the fast-growing Hispanic population has come of age politically. Latinos increased by nearly 60% during the 1990s, overtaking African-Americans as the nation’s largest minority group. While Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans tend to lean Democratic, Cuban Americans remain overwhelmingly Republican, and the party loyalties of other Hispanics seem to be in flux. Thus these groups represent sizable blocs of swing voters not only in California, Texas, and New York but, more importantly, in closely-contested states such as Florida, Arizona, and New Mexico.

In 2004, most Anglo-American voters care a great deal more about issues like the Iraq war and a slumping economy than about the symbolic politics of language. For Latinos, on the other hand, the symbolism is significant.

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Even though many of them speak limited Spanish themselves, they appreciate the respect for their cultural heritage, however token, and politicians increasingly feel pressure to provide it. Now, it seems, candidates can usually do so without risking Anglo support.

Nevertheless, tolerance has its limits. The Democratic standard-bearer, John Kerry, is willing to show off his halting Spanish while carefully concealing his fluent French. Despite bantering off-the-record with French journalists, he reportedly refuses to be recorded speaking the language. The political peril is obvious. One Bush cabinet member has already charged that Kerry 'looks French,' seeking to capitalize on some Americans' loathing for Old Europe following the split over US military adventures in Iraq. Sounding French as well could be the *coup de grâce* – or so Kerry's strategists fear.

President Bush has openly criticized the English-only movement, a calculated move, well-vetted by advisers. But does he reject the xenophobia behind it? In a spontaneous moment, his personal feelings seemed to come through. The occasion was a joint press briefing in Paris with Jacques Chirac, the president of France. An American reporter posed a question for Bush, in English naturally. Then he then turned to Chirac and asked him for comment in French – just a token of respect, since Chirac is fluent in English (*'Monsieur le President, pouvez-vous ajouter votre sentiments?'*). Obviously caught off guard by the journalist's bilingual ability, Bush responded with ridicule: 'Very good. The guy memorizes four words, and he plays like he's intercontinental. ... I'm impressed. *Que bueno!* Now I'm literate in two languages' (Office of the Press Secretary, 2002).

Did Bush mean to suggest that proficient bilingualism is inappropriate for a 'real American'? Did he intend to insult the French, implying that they should get used to the hegemony of English? Was he appealing more broadly to anti-intellectualism in his Far Right political base? Perhaps he simply resented the unflattering comparison with his own language skills and reacted defensively. Whatever the case, it is hard to imagine such a statement by any other leader representing his nation abroad, if nothing else, because of the embarrassment it would cause back home. But Bush's gaffe received little attention in the United States, even though the White House posted the comments on its website. Perhaps Republican strategists believed the incident would boost the president's popularity.

Apparently, it's still true that – to paraphrase H.L. Mencken – an American politician can never go too far wrong by overestimating the parochialism of his constituents.