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Sándor Czeglédi: The Potential Federal-level Impact of the Seal of Biliteracy Movement: Bilingualism as a Re-emerging Resource in the U.S.?
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The Potential Federal-level Impact of the Seal of Biliteracy Movement: Bilingualism as a Re-emerging Resource in the U.S.?

Bilingual education has long been a contentious issue in the United States, especially since the passage of the first Bilingual Education Act in 1968. Since the 1980s, the relatively quick mainstreaming of language minority students has been taking precedence, and this assimilationist tendency was reinforced by several state-level referenda as well in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

However, the anti-bilingual backlash was met with strong opposition by bilingual education advocates, who launched the Seal of Biliteracy movement in California in 2008. Today, all 50 states plus Washington, D.C., award the Seal to high school students who have attained (approximately B1-B2-level) proficiency in two or more languages.

This investigation focuses on congressional and presidential documents to determine whether the spectacular state-level successes of the movement could eventually influence federal educational policies. The findings suggest that while such shifts may occur in the long term, the current political climate does not favor new, language-as-resource-oriented policy changes at the federal level.

Keywords: Seal of Biliteracy, bilingual education, Congress, United States

1. Introduction

Despite the anti-bilingual backlash, which has characterized the language policy landscape in the United States for roughly the past three decades, the Seal of Biliteracy movement has proved to be remarkably successful. This backlash is not merely a pedagogical disagreement but reflects the long-standing politicization of bilingual education, which—despite its clear suitability for linguistically diverse societies—has been “politicised, polarised, and freighted with controversy from its inception” (Cummins, 2021, p. xxi). In spite of this, today every single U.S. state awards the Seal to high school students who have attained (mostly B1, occasionally B2-level) proficiency in two or more languages—although the recognized languages and even the proficiency levels may vary considerably.

The principal aim of this examination is to determine whether the state-level enthusiasm associated with the Seal of Biliteracy movement might be transformed into federal legislative (and/or executive) recognition and even support, potentially shifting the current, mostly “(minority) language-as-problem” oriented attitudes and ideologies toward a “language-as-resource” direction, especially in

the context of the long overdue reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

By and large, language use tendencies in the United States paint an ambiguous picture, where the interpretation mostly depends on the observer's attitude toward linguistic diversity. According to the results of the American Community Survey, currently 77.5% of the "five years and over" population speaks "only English at home" today, with Spanish being the most popular non-English language in American households, used regularly by 13.4% of the population (DP02, Selected Social Characteristics in the United States, 2023). From the total "five years and older" population, the percentage of those who speak English "less than very well" is 8.7% (*ibid.*), which may be regarded as an alarming figure by those who embrace the melting pot-type assimilation pattern as the only effective and desirable identity-forming and nation-building strategy.

However, despite the fact that the "only English at home" percentage was somewhat higher in 2010 (recorded at 79.4%) according to a previous American Community Survey, the proportion of less-than-fluent bilinguals was found to be identical to nowadays: 8.7% (DP02, Selected Social Characteristics in the United States, 2010). This fact in itself indicates the spread of bilingual proficiency among Americans—already noted by James Crawford (2002) in connection with the 2000 Census—which could nevertheless conjure up the specter of "hyphenated Americanism" and divided loyalty in those who believe in the idea(l) of equating "one language" with "one people" (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994, p. 61). Historically, such anxieties have been central to official-English advocacy, whose explicit goals included not only establishing English as the official language but also opposing bilingual education and the broader provision of bilingual services (Nunberg, 1989, p. 579).

In the context of societal bilingualism, a more readily perceptible and controversial phenomenon is the constant rise of English learners (ELs)—formerly: limited English proficient children and students—in the American school system. Nationwide, the current percentage of public school students classified as ELs has exceeded 10% (5-5.5 million students), but in New Mexico, California, and Texas, the comparable figures range between 18.8 and 20.2% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

The question of what types of linguistic accommodations should be provided for English learners (if at all) to make the curriculum more accessible and to reduce the number of dropouts has evolved into one of the key language policy battlegrounds in the United States—in addition to the officialization of English and the guaranteeing (or denying) of linguistic access to civil rights and government services (Schmidt, 2000, p. 11). As Crawford (1992, pp. 4–5) observes, language conflicts in the United States tend to surface during periods of demographic and cultural anxiety, when language is transformed from a practical means of communication into a symbolic marker of national loyalty and

belonging. In fact, the disputes related to “bilingual education” (BE) have become inseparable from the civil rights context, especially since the mid-1970s. Still, BE is an oversimplifying umbrella term, which comprises (almost) entirely monolingual, subtractive models, e.g., ESL “pullout,” structured English immersion (SEI), as well as the enrichment- and maintenance-oriented “dual language” or “two-way immersion” models at the additive end of the spectrum (see e.g. the English Learner Tool Kit (2017, p. 10)).

After the *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) Supreme Court decision, which outlawed “sink-or-swim” type of submersion and mandated *some* form of linguistic accommodations for English learners—at the bare minimum: ESL classes—the Office for Civil Rights of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) began an aggressive campaign to promote “bilingual/bicultural” and “multilingual/multicultural” programs, relying on their own guidelines, the so-called “Lau Remedies” (Task-Force Findings Specifying Remedies..., 1975).

Throughout the late 1970s, the federal Office for Civil Rights continued to monitor school districts’ performance in serving language minority children. Thus, BE soon became seen as yet another “big government” mandate, especially after the vigorous (sometimes aggressive) federal enforcement of the Lau Remedies (Crawford, 2000, p. 93). Eventually, this heavy-handed attitude triggered an anti-bilingual backlash, whose influence was to be felt during the Reagan Administration’s emphasis on “local flexibility” (i.e., no federal promotion of strong, additive BE models) and the inclusion of all-English instructional methods in the grant programs supported through the Bilingual Education Acts. Indirectly, the single-minded promotion of bilingual/bicultural education had contributed to the growing (Republican) animosity toward the newly-created Department of Education in 1979, the latest manifestation of which was Donald Trump’s recycled Reaganite threat to abolish it altogether (Blake, 2024).

Since 1968, the Bilingual Education Acts, which until 2001 had constituted Title VII of the regularly reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), provided an opportunity for the states and school districts to apply for federal funds in order to experiment with various bilingual education models, predominantly to ease the transition of English learners into mainstream, all-English education. However, from time to time (especially in the second half of the 1970s and in 1994), the more multiculturalist versions of the Act allowed increased support to minority language maintenance. The 2001 ESEA reauthorization drastically eliminated these policy shifts, the “No Child Left Behind” Act, which almost totally erased the word “bilingual” from the text of the legislation, and the previous Bilingual Education Act was renamed as the “English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement Act” (Czeplédi, 2017, pp. 8, 10).

While the Obama-era reauthorization of the ESEA (known as the “Every Student Succeeds Act” of 2015) returned much of the responsibility of overseeing and implementing educational reform to the states—an approach consistent with the (practically nonexistent) federal role in this area—the assimilationist ideological stance of the law has remained intact (Czeplédi, 2017, p. 15).

While somewhat extreme language ideological swings at the state and local level may occasionally produce unusually harsh language policy measures, sweeping, substantive language policies are relatively rarely created at the federal level. This is largely due to the fact that neither language nor education is mentioned in the Constitution; consequently, on the basis of the 9th and 10th Amendments, the responsibility to regulate these areas should belong to the states and localities. The failure to declare English the official language of the United States by an Act of Congress (or by a constitutional amendment) illustrates the point, although to date, approximately 200 legislative proposals have been introduced in Congress to that effect since the early 1980s (Czeplédi, 2018, pp. 83-101).

The recent attempt by Donald J. Trump to officialize the English language by executive fiat (Executive Order 14,224, issued in March, 2025), is a carefully worded piece designed to put an end to the linguistic access-oriented policies (multilingual official documents, home pages, translation and interpretation services, etc.) by offering federal departments and agencies the possibility of discontinuing these policies (but there is no obligation to do so) (“Designating English as the Official Language of The United States,” 2025).

However, Trump’s executive order is far from symbolic: it illustrates how the federal level is distancing itself from the remainder of “minority language-as-resource” policies and practices by de-emphasizing multilingual supports and changing the context in which, e.g., states or districts implement the Seal of Biliteracy. Moreover, U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi’s memorandum on the implementation of EO 14,224 openly recommends that agencies consider “English-only services” and redirect saved funds “toward research and programs that improve English proficiency and assimilation” (Bondi, 2025, pp. 3-4).

Perhaps even less conspicuous was the decision by the federal Department of Education in August, 2025, which rescinded the Obama-era English Learner language policy guidance for schools (issued in 2015). By doing so, the Department further weakened the already-contested claim that language-based (unintentional) discrimination amounted to national-origin discrimination (prohibited by Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1965), thus removing some potential legal obstacles from the implementation of (nearly or entirely) English-only educational programs for language minority students (Meckler & McDaniel, 2025).

By contrast to the somewhat surreptitious promotion of English by the executive branch at the federal level, 32 of the 50 states have already declared

English (and a few of them several indigenous languages as well) as their official medium of communication (Official English Map, 2023).

To date, one of the most repressive, assimilationist language policies at the state level was implemented after World War I, when the majority of states practically banned “foreign” language teaching (as an anti-German measure). These laws were eventually struck down by the Supreme Court in the landmark *Meyer v. Nebraska* (1923) case. More recently, in the wake of the so-called “English for the Children” campaigns, voters agreed to dismantle the majority of strong BE programs in California (1998), Arizona (2000), and Massachusetts (2002), which, according to Crawford, represented “the worst setback for bilingual education since the World War I era” (1998). Fifteen years later, these restrictions on additive BE programs started to unravel, but this time not due to federal judicial decisions. The successful undoing of the majority of the anti-bilingual restrictions in these states happened largely as a result of the spreading Seal of Biliteracy movement, which has sought to recognize the achievements of students “who have studied and attained proficiency in two or more languages by high school graduation” (What is the Seal?, 2025). By 2024, all 50 states and the District of Columbia had established a Seal of Biliteracy program, and it “has the potential to influence the prevalence of bilingual education across the country” (Hancock & Davin, 2021, p. 71).

2. A Brief History of the Seal of Biliteracy

In 1998, California voters gave their approval to a ballot measure (Proposition 227) which mandated that “all children in California public schools shall be taught English as rapidly and effectively as possible” (Crawford, 2000, p. 95), effectively making short-term structured English immersion the de facto default “bilingual” education model in the state.

The decision was a not-entirely-unexpected continuation of previous, assimilationist ballot initiatives by Californians, who declared English the official language of the state in 1986 (Proposition 63); denied public education to illegal immigrants in 1994 (Proposition 187); and banned affirmative action in 1996 (Proposition 209). By the time Proposition 227’s “monolingual mandate” was overridden by yet another referendum, Proposition 58 in 2016, “the state’s bilingual teacher training programs were largely dismantled, and millions of California students progressed through a K–12 educational system that actively stigmatized ELs’ bilingualism and proficiency in non-English languages” (Williams & Zabala, 2023).

Even today, despite conscious efforts to promote multilingualism and to boost the spread of dual-language immersion programs (for example, under the aegis of the Global California 2030 initiative), the state is lagging behind Texas, Alaska, and several others in this respect (*ibid.*). Arizona and Massachusetts, affected by similar “English for the Children” initiatives, have also been rolling back the

monolingual educational restrictions. In both California and Arizona, voters approved the Seal of Biliteracy initiatives while the previous, restrictive laws (resulting from Proposition 227 and Proposition 203, respectively) were technically still in force, whereas in Massachusetts the Seal of Biliteracy was approved by the same bill (the “LOOK Act” of 2017) that simultaneously eliminated BE restrictions (Hancock & Davin, 2021, p. 72; LOOK Act, 2018).

In California, the history of the Seal can be traced back to a Bilingual Competency Award offered by a school district in Los Angeles since 1992 (Hancock & Davin, 2021, p. 78). Legislative efforts to establish the statewide Seal of Biliteracy failed twice, in 2006 and in 2008—vetoed by then-governor Arnold Schwarzenegger (Rep.), who has been an advisory board member at the Official English advocacy group “U.S. English” since 1987 (About US English, 2022)—but eventually the new governor, Jerry Brown (Dem.), signed the bill into law in 2011.

The Seal of Biliteracy (SoBL) award has evolved into a resounding success story. By the beginning of 2024 (when South Dakota also adopted the SoBL), all 50 states plus Washington, D.C. had established a State Seal of Biliteracy program; however, each state sets up its own rules and award criteria (Aguirre & Chou, 2024, p. 3). The SoBL was awarded in 143 languages across the U.S. in the 2022-2023 school year, with Washington and New York states topping the list by recognizing proficiency in 84 and 80 languages, respectively (*ibid.*). California awarded the SoBL in 58 languages—and even Hungarian was recognized as a legitimate target language in 13 states (Aguirre & Chou, 2024, pp. 8-12).

To measure proficiency, most states rely on the leveling system created by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), which is comparable to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). The minimum thresholds for the SoBL usually range from Intermediate Low to Advanced Low, which are the rough equivalents of A2 to B2 on the CEFR rating scale, although a few states have developed a multi-tiered system for the award (Hancock & Davin, 2021, p. 75).

More recently, the SoBL has gone global: inspired by the State Seal of Biliteracy, the Global Seal of Biliteracy certificate (promoted by various language testing services) is now issued not only in the U.S. states but “in 60 countries and territories worldwide” (“Our Story,” 2023). The Global Seal recognizes “Functional” (B1), “Working” (B2), and “Professional Fluency” (C1) (“Qualified Tests & Requirements,” 2023).

In 2025, a major operational development in the history of the Seal happened when the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) adopted the Seal of Biliteracy to prepare “military-connected students for success in college and global careers, while... developing potential future warriors’ proficiency in languages... critical to... U.S. national security interests” (Department of Defense Education Activity, 2025). This is significant because DoDEA is a federal school

system with global reach, and thus the Seal’s adoption is a concrete federal implementation decision even while most Seal authority remains state-based.

3. Aims, Method, and Corpora

The Seal of Biliteracy award has evolved from a relatively obscure protest movement against the anti-BE policies in California in the wake of Proposition 227 into a nationwide and global(izing) phenomenon.

The question is whether these achievements can influence federal-level legislative and executive discourse, which in turn might lead to a greater recognition and even promotion of “strong” BE models aiming to produce functional bilingual and biliterate individuals, partly by maintaining and developing the heritage languages of the EL population. Obviously, a policy shift of this kind would amount to the embracement of a “language-as-resource” orientation (Ruiz, 1984, pp. 15-34), which values societal multilingualism and cultural diversity. In this framework, languages are thought to have both extrinsic (societal) and intrinsic (individual) value (Hult & Hornberger, 2016, p. 33); consequently, both minority language maintenance efforts and foreign language learning/teaching are encouraged—ideally, with the help of dual language programs.

This investigation tries to determine the extent to which the possible signs of a shift from a near-default, although frequently latent, “language-as-problem” orientation toward “language-as-right” and/or “language-as-resource” interpretations are discernible in federal legislative discourse in which the “Seal of Biliteracy” phrase appears. In order to achieve this, the examination focuses on the type of legislation (simple, concurrent, joint resolutions, and bills); the activities of the House and the Senate; and the chances of passage by checking the number and party affiliation of the (co)sponsors of the pieces. In addition to analyzing the text of proposed legislation, the transcripts of relevant committee meetings and hearings will also be taken into consideration. These sources are freely accessible in the online legislative database of the Federal Congress (at congress.gov).

In order to complement the findings related to the legislative branch, presidential documents will be checked as well from a similar perspective, relying on the American Presidency Project database at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>.

4. Findings and discussion

The case-insensitive, exact phrase match search carried out in the congressional database (focusing on all available documents that contained “Seal of Biliteracy”) returned 107 relevant records on January 3, 2026, at the closing of the first session of the 119th Congress.

The distribution of these 107 records was the following:

Table 1. The distribution of “Seal of Biliteracy”-related legislative documents in the congress.gov database at the end of the first session of the 119th Congress (Jan. 3, 2026)

Document type	No. of relevant records (107)
Proposed Legislation:	68
Congressional Record:	30
Committee Reports:	6
Committee Meetings:	2
Committee Publications:	1

The legislative proposals were all substantive pieces (bills and amendments) with the exception of one symbolic House Resolution from 2023 (H.Res. 229 IH), which was to recognize the significance of the 1973 New Mexico Bilingual Multicultural Education Act but was supported by only 2 Representatives out of 435 (both of them were Democrats)—and failed as a consequence. This piece professed support for “bilingual multicultural education” and encouraged the creation of grants to fund the Seal of Biliteracy program (H.Res. 229 IH, (1-2)). The spectacular lack of support behind the clearly language-as-resource-oriented but entirely symbolic resolution is reminiscent of the fate of the similar “English Plus Resolution” by Representative José Enrique Serrano (D-NY). Serrano had introduced not fewer than nine “English Plus” Concurrent Resolutions in the House between 1995 and 2011—only to witness cosponsorship behind the proposals fall from 42 to 0 after 2000 (Czeplédi, 2015, pp. 87-99).

The substantive proposals were mostly amendments, trying to attach the Seal of Biliteracy (grant) policy to other, frequently unrelated pieces of legislation. However, there were 15 (mostly standalone) bills as well in the database, titled the “BEST Act” or Biliteracy Education Seal and Teaching Act.

Table 2. The frequencies of SoBL-related references per Congress

Congress	No. of records
119 th (1 st Sess.) (2025-2026)	3
118 th (2023-2024)	8
117 th (2021-2022)	60
116 th (2019-2020)	20
115 th (2017-2018)	2
114 th (2015-2016)	12
113 th (2013-2014)	2

The earliest recorded reference to the SoBL dates back to June 27, 2013, when the first version of the BEST Act was introduced in the House by Democratic Representative Julia Brownley from California. Previously, Brownley—then serving in the California State Assembly—sponsored similar legislation in the California legislature to establish the Seal in her home state (“Brownley puts...,” 2013). Despite the eventually successful California campaign, at the federal level, the promotion of biliteracy with (even limited) federal support was a lot harder to

sell: in 2013, the original BEST Act garnered only 14 cosponsors—all were Democrats.

The bill sought to “award grants to States to establish a Seal of Biliteracy program to recognize high-level student proficiency in speaking, reading, and writing in both English and a second language (H.R. 2549 IH). The Findings section of the bill stated that “the people of the United States celebrate cultural and linguistic diversity” (H.R. 2549 IH, Sec. 2(1)), and mentioned that “the study of world languages... contributes to a student’s cognitive development and to the national economy and security” (Sec. 2(3)). That is: both the intrinsic (individual) and extrinsic (societal) benefits of bilingualism were pointed out, even though in a limited way, emphasizing “world languages” only. Nevertheless, further sections of the bill clarified that “the Secretary of Education shall award grants to States to establish or improve a Seal of Biliteracy program to recognize student proficiency in speaking, reading, and writing in both English and a second language” (Sec. 3(a)), and “second language” in fact meant “any language other than English, including Braille and American Sign Language” (Sec. 3(h)(2)).

The 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—since 2002: the “No Child Left Behind” Act (NCLB)—provided a logical opportunity to promote the SoBL at the federal level. Representative Brownley attempted to add an amendment to H.R. 5 (the “Student Success Act”), which eventually passed the House, but in the end, it was the “Every Student Succeeds Act” that became Public Law No. 114-95, replacing the by then all but defunct NCLB in December 2015. Brownley’s amendment (the BEST Act) to H.R. 5 was voted down—almost entirely along party lines—on July 8, 2015 (Roll Call 415, 2015). The original sponsor of H.R. 5, Rep. John Kline (R-MN-2), was also opposed to the SoBL idea, although he agreed with the advantages of bi- or multilingualism in principle. (Kline even fondly recalled having learnt some Spanish and German in high school). Nevertheless, the Minnesota Representative was strongly against the idea of creating “yet another Federal program” that was to cost 10 million dollars annually, and encouraged his colleagues as well to oppose the amendment, which they mostly did (U.S. Congress, 2015, p. H1294).

The year 2020 witnessed the first introduction of the BEST Act in the Senate by Brian Schatz, a Democratic Senator from Hawaii, the state that has been officially bilingual (English-Native Hawaiian) since 1978, and has achieved great success in revitalizing the indigenous language. The bill (S. 3328 IH) contained new (sub)paragraphs and sections compared to the first version in 2013. The Findings section made a significant reference to Hawaiian language revitalization and argued that the “use of proficiency in a government-recognized official Native American language as the base language for a Seal of Biliteracy...” has been successfully demonstrated there (S. 3328 IH, Sec. 2(9)). The definition of “second language” was also broadened to include Classical languages (Sec. 3(4)), and

Native American languages were allowed to be used as base languages in SoBL programs instead of English (Sec. 4(a)(2)). States were required to ensure in their grant application plans that English learners and Native American language speakers were included in their State SoBL programs (Sec. 4(b)(2)).

These stipulations can be found in the latest Senate versions of the BEST Act as well, with further modifications and additions. The Findings section praises Utah, Arizona, Washington, and New Mexico for having “developed innovative testing methods for languages, including Native American languages, where no formal proficiency test currently exists” (S. 3595 IH, Sec. 2(8)). The definition of “classical language” has been extended further, specifically mentioning Greek, Latin, Chinese, Arabic, and Sanskrit (Sec. 3(2)(B)). The 2024 version also attempts to be more inclusive than before: state plans are to ensure that equitable access is provided not only to ELs, but also to “students with identified disabilities, including vision and hearing impairments and cognitive or learning disabilities” in the SoBL programs (Sec. 4(b)(2)(A-B)). However, neither the House nor the Senate version of the bill was passed in 2024, and the number of cosponsors had also declined in the House, which is generally a bad omen concerning the prospects of any legislative initiative. However, House support has rebounded recently for the 2025 version of the BEST Act, which now (in January 2026) has 19 cosponsors in addition to Representative Brownley—although all of them are Democrats (H.R. 1660 IH). Furthermore, the proposed funding levels of the BEST Act remained nominally the same as they were in 2013: “\$10,000,000 for each of fiscal years 2025 through 2029”= \$40,000,000 altogether (Sec. 4(f)), despite the fact that (due to inflation) in February 2025, \$55 million had the same purchasing power as 40 million more than a decade before (CPI Inflation Calculator, 2026).

The most frantic legislative activism with respect to the SoBL took place during the 117th Congress (2021-2022), when 60 references to the Seal were recorded. There were two possible explanations for this heightened legislative attention.

First, the House passed the BEST Act in July of 2020 as Amendment No. 55 to the William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 (H.R. 6395), but the amendment failed to clear the Senate (“House Passes Brownley’s..., 2020). From that year, a companion bill to the House version of the BEST Act was introduced in the Senate as well (S. 3328 IH), sponsored by Senator Brian Schatz (D-HI), which increased the number of references to these bills in the Congressional Record and committee reports as well.

Second, the legislative tactic of attaching the BEST Act to a powerful “rider bill” continued. For this purpose, the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) was chosen, which proved to be a successful move—at least in the lower

chamber. The BEST Act managed to clear the House this way (as an amendment to the NDAA) in 2021 (Bernstein, 2021) and in 2022 as well (Robinson, 2022). However, in the Senate, the amendment method did not work. In both cases, the relevant Congressional Record laconically stated that the “Senate amendment [of the final version of the NDAA] contained no similar provision” (U.S. Congress, 2022).

The clearest indicator of the (un)popularity of a legislative proposal is the total number of sponsors and cosponsors who declare openly that they would vote for that particular bill or resolution. In this respect, the standalone versions of the BEST Act offer the deepest insight:

Table 3. (Co)sponsorship of the House and Senate versions of the BEST Act

Year of Introduction; Title (Bill No.)	Number (and Percentage) of (Co)sponsors
2025; BEST Act (H.R. 1660)	20 Dem. (4.6%); 0 Rep.
2024; BEST Act (S. 3595)	8 Dem. (8%); 0 Rep.
2024; BEST Act (H.R. 7007)	19 Dem. (4.4%); 0 Rep.
2021; BEST Act (S. 680)	8 Dem. (8%); 0 Rep.
2021; BEST Act (H.R. 1731)	31 Dem. (7.1%); 0 Rep.
2020; BEST Act (S. 3328)	2 Dem. (2%); 0 Rep.
2019; BEST Act (H.R. 3119)	25 Dem. (5.7%); 0 Rep.
2013; BEST Act (H.R. 2549)	15 Dem. (3.4%); 0 Rep.

A quick comparison of (co)sponsorship data shows that the BEST Act has never exceeded 8% in terms of unequivocal support (of the total membership of the respective chambers), which is very low as far as the odds of passage are concerned. Besides, the proposals do not have any kind of bipartisan backing, as not a single Republican has ever been added to their cosponsorship lists to date.

Moreover, the current political landscape and historic challenges—ranging from high inflation, seemingly uncontrollable migration, potential energy crises, a renewed Cold War, and very real full-scale wars—do not favor the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, despite the fact that it is approximately six years overdue now. It is true, however, that the previous reauthorization of the ESEA had also experienced a long delay, as the NCLB was to have been renewed by 2007, yet the “Every Student Succeeds Act” was signed into law only in December 2015. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the Seal of Biliteracy movement and the BEST Act in particular, the lack of federal attention (and even hostility) to the federal role in education considerably dims the prospects of increasing cosponsorship, and most likely prevents eventual passage.

To make the future outlook even worse, executive attention to the SoBL had been less than minimal even before the inauguration of the second Trump Administration. The American Presidency Project database contains no references to the Seal of Biliteracy at all, and “biliteracy” itself (spelled as “bi-literacy”) appears only twice in presidential documents as of January 2025. In

both cases, Democratic presidents made references to the notion. Bill Clinton issued a Memorandum on International Education Policy for the heads of executive departments and agencies on April 19, 2000, in which he stated that in order to maintain competitiveness and a global U.S. leadership role, American citizens need to “develop a broad understanding of the world, proficiency in other languages, and knowledge of other cultures” (Clinton, 2000). More specifically, Clinton urged the Secretaries of State and Education to support state and local governments to strengthen “foreign language learning at all levels, including efforts to achieve bi-literacy” (ibid.).

The second presidential reference to biliteracy was considerably less direct and more symbolic. On January 18, 2021, then President-elect Joe Biden, when announcing the filling of key administration posts in a press release, praised Deputy Secretary of State nominee Cindy Marten for establishing “a highly successful bi-literacy program” in a San Diego school, where she had previously worked as a classroom teacher (Biden, 2021).

5. Conclusion

The examination of the Seal of Biliteracy (SoBL) movement underscores the evolving dynamics of bilingualism and biliteracy-related attitudes, ideologies, and policies in the United States. This study attempted to determine whether the state-level march of the Seal of Biliteracy movement could influence federal legislative and executive recognition of bilingualism, and potentially shift federal language ideologies from the dominant “language-as-problem” orientation to a “language-as-resource” approach. By analyzing legislative documents and presidential records, the investigation sought evidence of this putative ideological transformation within the broader context of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

The findings reveal that while the SoBL has achieved remarkable growth at the state level, its impact on federal discourse remains limited. The analysis of congressional activities highlighted the relatively consistent but decisively insufficient legislative support for the Biliteracy Education Seal and Teaching (BEST) Act. The lack of bipartisan sponsorship and persistent opposition to perceived expansions of federal involvement in education have stalled progress, especially in the Senate, exposing the enduring ideological divide on bilingual education at the national level. Despite the BEST Act’s explicit alignment with societal and individual benefits of bilingualism—economic competitiveness, cultural diversity, and cognitive development—its provisions failed to gain traction in Congress across multiple sessions.

Executive (non-)recognition of biliteracy is even more unexpected in comparison. The presidency has largely remained disengaged from advancing biliteracy as a national priority, although Chief Executives often explicitly became involved in promoting specific language policies, for example, Plain Language

initiatives (Czeplédi, 2021, pp. 48-51). This gap further reflects the challenge of achieving federal bipartisan and also interbranch consensus on an issue often perceived as tied to broader debates on immigration, identity, and assimilation.

Despite these federal-level obstacles, the SoBL's success at the state level and its global reach have demonstrated its potential to challenge entrenched ideologies. By establishing a concrete framework for recognizing multilingual proficiency, the SoBL provides a model for how bilingualism can be valued and perhaps even institutionalized. The movement's increasingly inclusive criteria, encompassing heritage, indigenous, and classical languages, further highlight its adaptability and cultural sensitivity—characteristics that could inspire future policymakers in a more distant and less English mainstreaming-oriented future.

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