



Designating English as the Official Language: Explainer

Overview

On March 1, 2025, President Trump issued [Executive Order 14224](#), “Designating English as the Official Language of The United States,” which, as the name suggests, declares English as the official language of the U.S. The executive order also revokes [Executive Order 13166](#), “Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency,” signed by President Bill Clinton in 2000. Executive Order (EO) 13166 required federal agencies and recipients of federal funding to improve access to their services for those with limited English proficiency (LEP). To comply with EO 13166, federal agencies [released](#) various resources and guidance on how entities should achieve better access to their services. Those guidance documents were [key resources](#) on standards, best practices, and technical assistance that helped government agencies comply with the executive order.

The Trump administration’s EO 14224 lifts those requirements — meaning that federal agencies and recipients of federal funding are no longer required to [implement](#) plans to ensure that LEP individuals can access their services. EO 14224 requires the U.S. Attorney General to [withdraw](#) policy guidance documents that were previously issued under EO 13166 and provide “updated guidance” that takes into account EO 14224.

The Trump administration’s action represents a departure from the previous administrations’ policies around language access. It is also the [first time](#) in the country’s history that the U.S. has declared an official language at the federal level.

The Trump administration touted EO 14224 as one that promotes unity and efficiency. The [memo](#) states that this order will “promote unity, cultivate a shared American culture for all citizens, ensure consistency in government operations, and create a pathway to civic engagement.” An official [Fact Sheet](#) accompanying EO 14224 asserts that the order will pave the way for operational efficiency and enable agencies to provide services more efficiently.

Prior Attempts: English the Official Language

There have been several prior [attempts](#) over the past decades to designate English as the U.S.’s official language. Those attempts were primarily through legislation, most recently a bill called the English Language Unity Act, which declared English as the official language of the U.S. This bill was introduced in Congress in [2005](#), [2007](#), [2011](#), [2017](#), [2021](#), [2023](#), and [2025](#). The legislation never passed, but had it been successful, it would have established English the official language of the U.S. through statute, making it law.

The Trump administration’s Executive Order 14224 is not statutory. As an executive order, it [does not have the power](#) to change existing federal laws and statutes. The order’s authority does not extend beyond the executive branch and is technically limited to telling federal agencies how to implement a statute. To declare English as the official language of the U.S., Congress would have to approve legislation establishing an official language and the president would have to sign it.

Potential Impact

Legal Impact of English as the Official Language

Because Executive Order 14224 is not a statute, its legal impact is rather limited. Federal civil rights laws, like Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, remain unchanged. Title VI prohibits discrimination based on national origin. Courts have [held](#) that discrimination based on national origin includes discrimination against limited English proficiency (LEP) individuals in circumstances in which language is used as a proxy for national origin. This principle has not been overruled by EO 14224; it is still [illegal](#) for recipients of federal funding to discriminate based on national origin and use language as a vehicle to do so. Moreover, courts have historically scrutinized executive orders that cause policy shifts that interfere with civil rights, so EO 14224 may face [legal scrutiny](#) if courts find that it interferes with civil rights laws.

Additionally, many local and state governments have passed [language access laws](#) that govern the language access policies within their jurisdictions. EO 14224 does not overrule those laws, and those policies continue to be the law.

Although EO 14224 eliminates a *requirement* that agencies and recipients of federal funding provide language assistance to those who do not speak English, the order expressly states that it [does not require](#) agencies to only operate in English or for agencies to stop offering services in languages other than English. In other words, it is [not forcing](#) federal agencies to make any changes to their language access services – though agencies may choose to eliminate those services.

Standing alone, the fact that President Trump declared English as the official language is a largely [symbolic](#) move. English is already the de facto language of the U.S. – our official communications, after all, are already in English - and designating it as the official language of the country does not change that.

Nevertheless, President Trump's order represents an attempt to [bypass](#) the legislative process through executive action. By issuing this executive order, this designation making English the official language did not go through the regular law-making steps. It was not approved by both Houses of Congress and then signed by the president. Notably, the numerous times that a bill establishing English as the official language has been introduced in Congress indicate general acceptance of the idea that this is an act that should be made via legislation.

Practical Impact on LEP Resource Offerings

Executive orders can still have detrimental, practical effects without overruling any laws. In this case, while EO 14224 may not overrule any existing civil rights laws, it could [run counter](#) to laws that require language access in certain contexts. Some of the [laws](#) that require language access in certain contexts include: Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act, the Food Stamp Act, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act, the Fair Housing Act, Equal Educational Opportunities Act, and the Stafford Act.

EO 14224 [undermines](#) these laws and sends the message that ensuring that LEP individuals have equal rights and can fully engage in their communities is not among the administration's priorities. Further, EO 14224 does practically impact the resources provided for LEP individuals. Because EO 14224 revokes EO 13166, the resources and policy guidance issued under EO 13166 are no longer mandatory, and there are no longer requirements to offer services in other languages. Even

though EO 13166 does not force agencies to make changes, lifting language access requirements means that agencies now have the freedom to rethink their policies around the services that they offer. With this newfound [flexibility](#), agencies may choose to continue to offer multilingual services, or they may decide to operate only in English, even if the EO does not require them to. Experts highlight that without the requirement of offering multilingual services, there may be fewer translated materials, creating [obstacles](#) for non-English Americans to access services.

July 14 Department of Justice Guidance Memo and Further Practical Impacts

On July 14, 2025, the Department of Justice (DOJ) released [guidance](#) advising agencies on how to implement EO 14224. This document sheds further light on some of the substantive effects of EO 114224.

The document discussed the actions the DOJ will immediately take pursuant to EO 14224. These included:

- Rescinding LEP guidance issued under EO 13166;
- Reviewing all non-English services currently offered and release plans to phase out unnecessary multilingual offerings;
- Temporarily suspend public-facing LEP guidance until new guidance regarding EO 14224 is issued; and,
- Issue new guidance within 180 days after soliciting recommendations and comments from other agencies.

The document also listed recommended actions it encouraged other federal agencies to take. These included:

- Rescind guidance issued under EO 13166 if it conflicts with EO 14224;
- Consider offering services exclusively in English if it will better serve the public;
- Consider using technology to communicate with LEP individuals to cut costs and reduce inefficiencies associated with the translation process;
- Provide a disclaimer that English is the official language with any multilingual services; and,
- Consider redirecting funds previously used for translation services toward English education programs.

As previously mentioned, EO 14224 does not have the authority to overrule federal civil rights laws like Title VI. However, the guidance document expresses the DOJ's intention to [change](#) their stance on their interpretation of national origin discrimination and whether that includes individuals with LEP. In the past, the DOJ's view was that under Title VI, not providing language assistance had a disparate impact based on national origin. In the new guidance, however, the DOJ [argued](#) that language access is distinct from national origin. They [state](#) that they "will no longer rely on the Title VI disparate impact regulations and directs other agencies similarly." It also argues that situations in which language is used as a proxy for national origin discrimination are rare.

It remains to be seen the degree to which agencies will follow this guidance. Regardless, the guidance confirms that the DOJ is taking steps to remove language access within its agency. The DOJ's recommendations also steer sister agencies to follow in its footsteps and offer English-only services as well. Despite EO 14224 expressly stating that agencies were not required to operate

exclusively in English or to eliminate their multilingual language offerings, the DOJ's guidance suggests that will ultimately be the result in practice.

Criticism

Critics and advocacy groups have warned of the detrimental impact Executive Order 14224 may have on those who do not speak English, including many U.S. citizens. Without language support, non-English speakers may be effectively [barred](#) from critical government services, such as accessing healthcare or educational resources to learn English, or interfere with their ability to vote, making their ability to adapt and assimilate into the U.S. much more difficult.

Others see the order as a stride towards discrimination. The Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus [criticized](#) the executive order as a “thinly veiled attempt to allow federal agencies to discriminate against immigrants.” Some advocacy groups [fear](#) that “[t]he exclusionary nature of the policy will only fuel xenophobia and discrimination” and the order only serves to “[subtract] immigrant communities’ [languages](#) and cultures from the country.”

Conclusion

This Executive Order furthers the Trump administration's broader policies around immigration and language access. In particular, it is consistent with the Trump administration's action of [taking down](#) the Spanish language version of the White House website at the beginning of his presidency in January 2025.

Ultimately, even though this proclamation is on its face symbolic because no actions are required of federal agencies, given that the DOJ plans to remove language access within its agency and the DOJ's [guidance](#) document advises agencies to do so as well, it's likely that other agencies will follow suit and take steps to remove access in line with the recommendations. Still, it is yet to be determined the degree to which sister agencies will change their policies around language access in accordance with EO 14224.

Moving forward, the DOJ's guidance document revealed the agency's [intention](#) to issue guidelines in the next 180 days that will help agencies navigate prioritizing English and determine when multilingual services are necessary. At that time, the DOJ will collect public comments on their released guidance for 30 days and then review those comments to determine whether their policy guidance needs to be modified. There are [over 25 million](#) LEP individuals in the U.S. — all of whom stand to be impacted by the executive order. Thus, these public comments have the potential to shape future policies around language access that affect millions of people.

Language policy experts have highlighted that [language policies](#) have a history of being ever-changing, and that it's likely that “the politics of immigration could help decide which direction that pendulum swings next.”

The National Immigration Forum would like to thank Reine Choy, Policy & Advocacy Intern, for developing this explainer.