

Language policies in education and the possibility of identity backlash

CEPR eBook “Nation Building: Big Lessons from Successes and
Failures”

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Nation-building through education

Education is one of the most powerful nation-building tool at the disposal of states

- ▶ Widely employed by European nation-states during their consolidation in 19th and 20th centuries
- ▶ Most famous example in France with transformation of “peasants into Frenchmen” (Weber, 1976)
- ▶ Compulsory education used by US states to incorporate immigrants (Bandiera et al., 2018)



The possibility of identity backlash

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- ▶ Empirically, even the most successful educational reforms faced strong resistance (Weber, 1976)
- ▶ Theoretically, minorities may resent the imposition of a majority identity through schooling
 - ▶ In models of cultural transmission (Bisin and Verdier 2000, 2001, 2011), parents value their culture, and can invest to counteract forces that transmit a different identity to their offspring

Case study: Foreign language bans in the US

Between 1917 and 1923, US states enact language restrictions in primary schools

- ▶ Motivated by WWI
- ▶ Goal is to instill patriotism in immigrant children and reduce importance of “hyphenated” identities
- ▶ Most laws were “English-only,” but German language targeted with explicit bans in the Midwest



German immigrants in the US

- ▶ Until then, no negative sentiment against Germans
 - ▶ Large group (10% of US population in 1900), more literate and skilled than other European immigrants, with high rates of socioeconomic integration
 - ▶ *Public opinion had come to accept the Germans as one of the most assimilable and reputable of immigrant groups. Repeatedly, older Americans praised them as law-abiding, speedily assimilated, and strongly patriotic....(Higham 1998)*
 - ▶ Their language and culture conserved through dense network of private and parochial schools

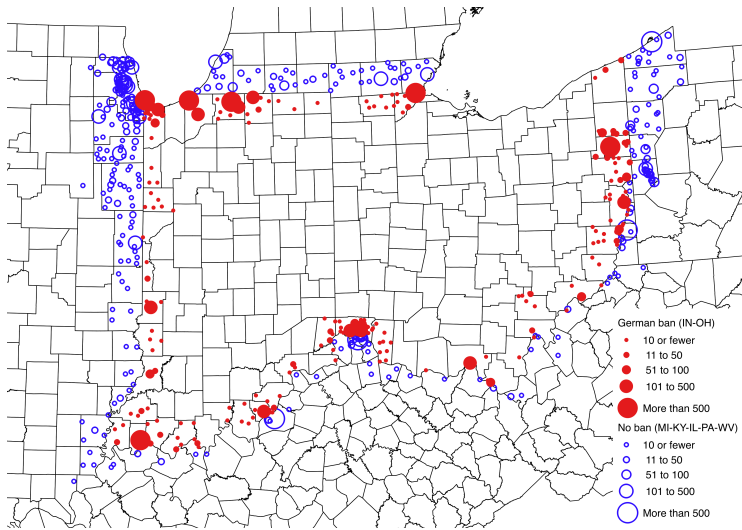
Advantages of case

- ▶ Restrictions not motivated by Germans' integration
- ▶ The goal was nation-building and minority assimilation
- ▶ Germans cultural distance from Anglo-Saxons was low – likely case for nation-building to work

Empirical strategy

- ▶ Compare Indiana and Ohio to neighboring states
- ▶ Difference-in-differences:
 - ▶ States with vs. without a law
 - ▶ Cohorts at school by compulsory state law vs. older cohorts
- ▶ Link children of German parents living in border counties in 1920 to 1930 and 1940 census (Abramitzky et al., 2014)

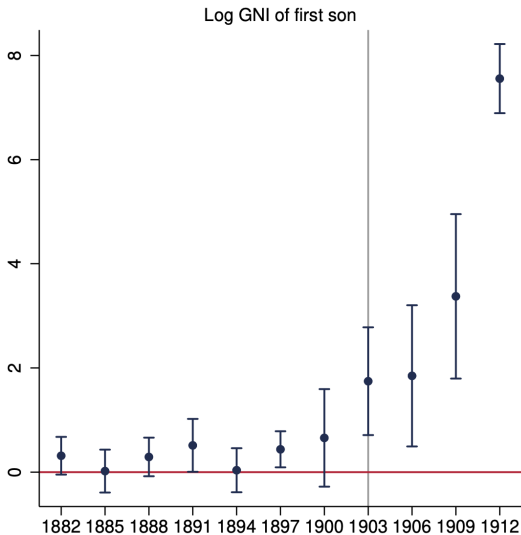
German-American children linked across censuses



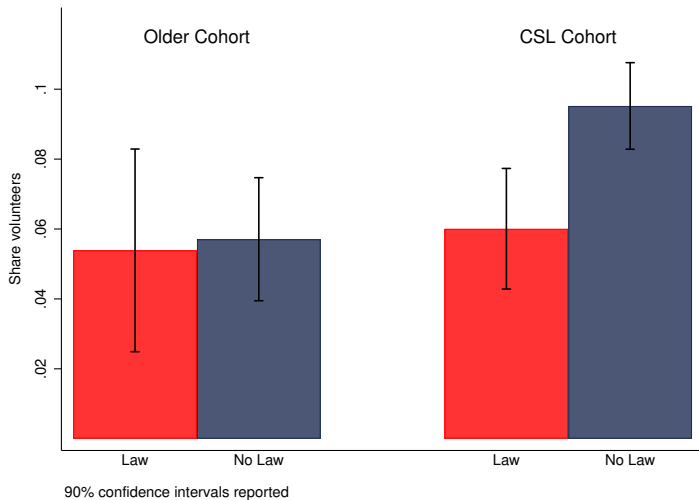
Identity measures

- ▶ Choices of ethnically distinctive names for offspring
- ▶ Intermarriage
- ▶ Decision to volunteer in US Army during WWII

Results – Children's first names



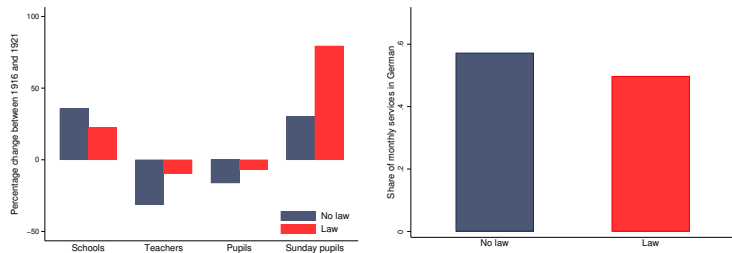
Results – Volunteering rates



Mechanisms

- ▶ Framework of intergenerational transmission of culture (Bisin and Verdier 2000, 2001, 2011) in which schooling and parental investment are substitutes
 - ▶ *Oppositional* types increase their investment in culture at home
 - ▶ Amplified through peer effects this can produce backlash

Direct evidence for parental substitution



Generalizability

Language and cultural policies in education have varied success rates

- ▶ Sometimes succeed in achieving homogenization
 - ▶ 19th century France (Blanc & Kubo, 2021), 20th century Catalonia (Clots-Figueras & Masella, 2013)
- ▶ Sometimes have null effects
 - ▶ Early 20th century US (Lleras Muney & Shertzer, 2015; Fouka, 2020)
- ▶ And can also generate backlash
 - ▶ Secularization of education in Turkey (Sakalli, 2019; Benzer, 2022), Germanization in Prussia (Cinnirella & Schüler, 2018)

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 - ▶ Individual level: social identity (Akerlof & Kranton, 2002, Shayo, 2009)
 - ▶ Group level: club goods model (Iannaccone, 1992)
 - ▶ Intergenerational: cultural transmission (Bisin & Verdier, 2000; Carvalho & Koyama, 2022)

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- ▶ Takeaways from empirical and theoretical literature
 - ▶ Attainability of assimilation targets relative to assimilation costs
 - ▶ Returns to education and majority identity
 - ▶ Penalties for non-compliance

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 - ▶ Penalties for non-compliance
- ▶ Attainable goals, high returns and strict enforcement can make nation-building through education more successful

For more, read the eBook! Thank you!